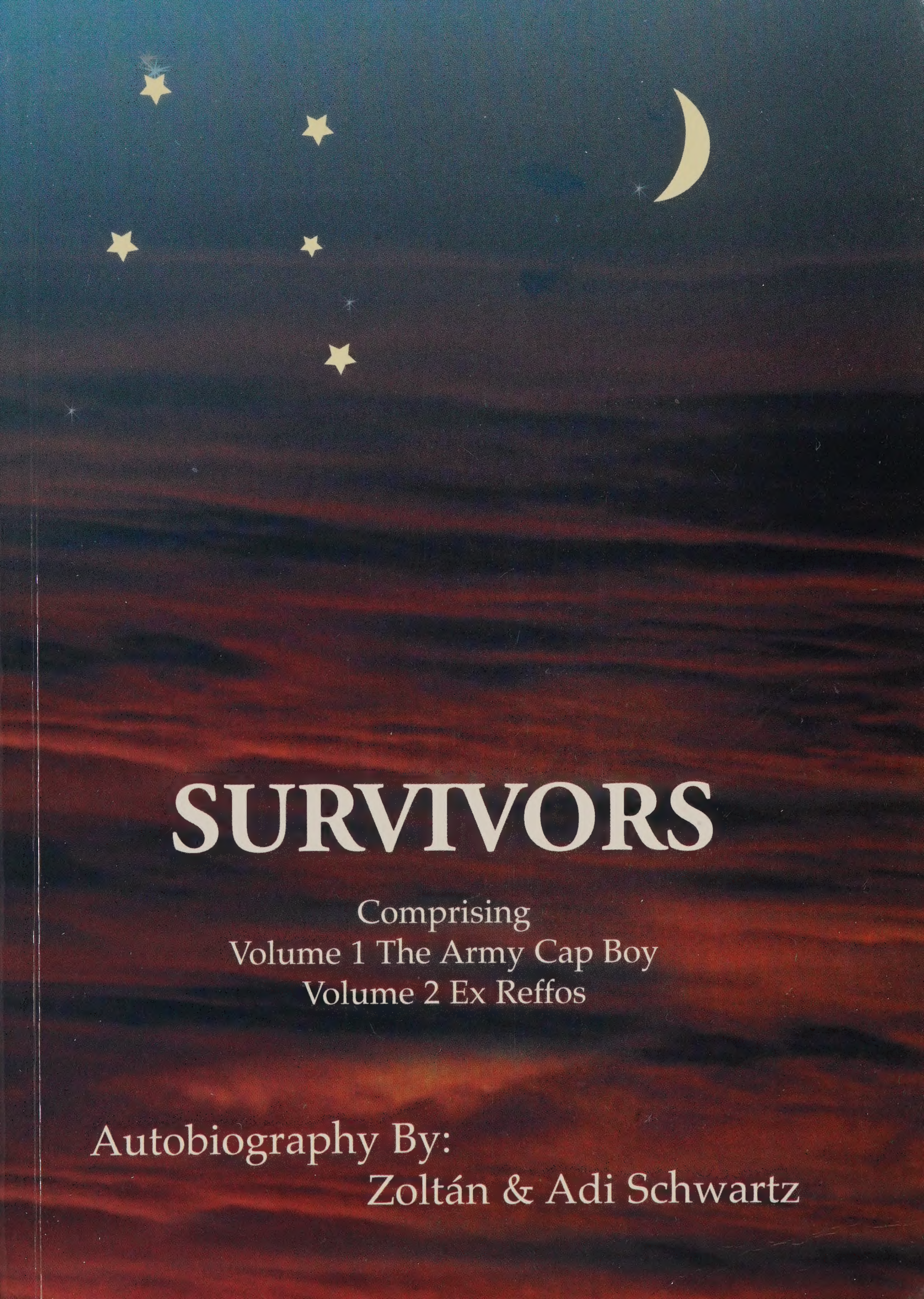
UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum respects the copyright and other intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection and makes good faith efforts to determine the copyright status of such materials. The Museum has a good faith belief that the materials in this collection may be made publicly available. The Museum welcomes additional information about copyright status. If you have additional information or concerns about the copyright ownership of materials in this collection, please contact the Museum's Library by phone at 202-479-9717 or by email at reference@ushmm.org.



SURVIVORS

Comprising
Volume 1 The Army Cap Boy
Volume 2 Ex Reffos

Autobiography By:
Zoltán & Adi Schwartz

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024 with funding from
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

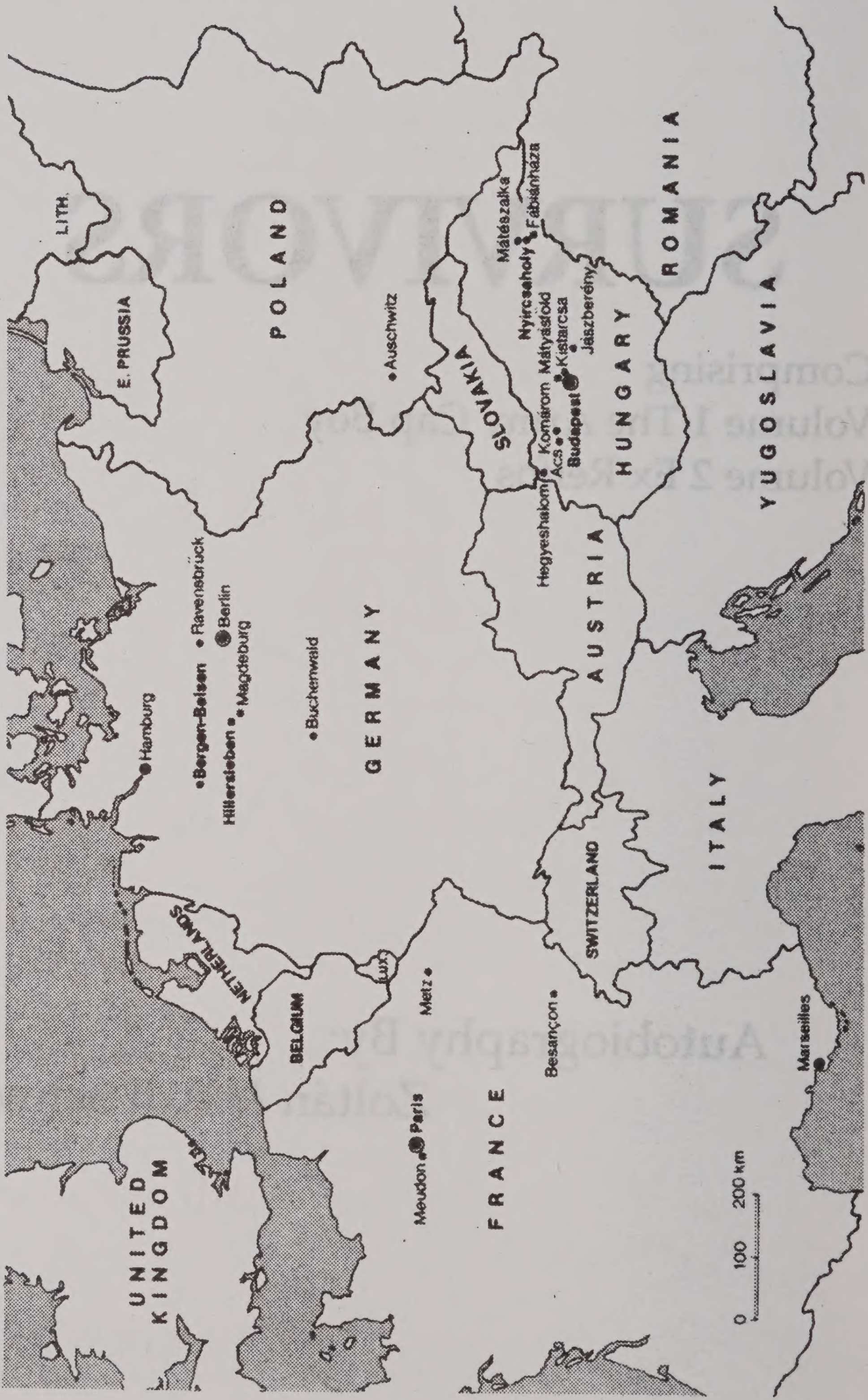
https://archive.org/details/bib293458

SURVIVORS

Comprising
Volume 1 The Army Cap Boy
Volume 2 Ex Reffos

Autobiography By:
Zoltán & Adi Schwartz

MAP OF EUROPE


LITH.
E. PRUSSIA
POLAND
Auschwitz
Mátészalka
Fábiánháza
Nyírcsaholy
Mátyásföld
Kistarcsa
Jászberény
ROMANIA
SLOVAKIA
Komárom
Ács
Budapest
HUNGARY
YUGOSLAVIA
Hegyeshalom
AUSTRIA
Ravensbrück
Berlin
Magdeburg
Hamburg
Bergen-Belsen
Hillersleben
Buchenwald
GERMANY
NETHERLANDS
BELGIUM
Lux.
Metz
Besançon
SWITZERLAND
ITALY
Marseilles
UNITED KINGDOM
Meudon
Paris
FRANCE
0 100 200 km

VOLUME ONE

THE ARMY-CAP BOY

The story of a teenage boy's survival in Hitler's Europe

By
Zoltán and Adi Schwartz

Copyright © Zoltán & Adi Schwartz 1999
All rights reserved
No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means without
permission
First published 1999 by Lina Publishing
P.O. Box A410 Sydney South 1235
Australia
email: linapublishing99@hotmail.com

National Library of Australia cataloguing in publication data.

Schwartz Zoltán & Adi
Survivors ISBN 0 9957 1632 X
The Army Cap Boy ISBN 0 9557 16303
(Originally published by The Macmillan Co 1983)
Ex Reffos ISBN 0 9577 16311

Set in Agaramond, Newtown, Sydney - Australia
Printed in Newtown Sydney Australia

Cover design by: Zoltán & Adi Schwartz

AUTHORS' NOTE.

Statements trying to discredit the events described herein have appeared in all the media while we, the survivors, are yet alive and can speak and testify to what we saw and suffered. The gas chambers and crematoria were built in a combined effort by the Germans and Poles to save on bullets and make wholesale killing more efficient. The Allies, for some reason of their own, did not drop one bomb to destroy the gas chambers and so save many lives.

BE NOT SILENT! THE TRUTH MUST BE TOLD. IT HAS TO BE KNOWN.

This book is dedicated to all those millions of people who suffered and died at the hands of the power drunk Nazi Germany and to the survivors who made their subsequent lives so meaningful.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Encyclopaedia Brittanica

Encyclopaedia Judaica

Horthy Miklós Titkos Iratai, edited by Miklós Szinai and Lászlo Szücs, published by Kossuth Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1963.

John Topham picture library, London.

Emigrant Ships to Luxury Liners by Peter Plowman, published by New South Wales University Press 1992.

Acknowledgment:

Our gratitude is due to Miriam Schifreen and Dora Velan for help in editing.

The names of persons still living have been changed and some characters are composites for reasons of privacy.

VOLUME 1

CONTENTS

1. Nyircsaholy, Hungary 1935 1

2. Budapest 28

3 Bergen Belsen 74

4. Liberated 110

5. France 1945 121

6 Voyage to a new Land 163

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Map of Europe vi
Sándor, Father of Zoltán 1920 27
Viki in Bucharest 1944 27
Zoltán in third grade 27
Ovens in the crematorium in Belsen 107
Belsen was burned by the British 107
Budapest after the war 108
Arrow Cross emblem 108
Wagons like the ones used to transport captives 109
Certificate issued to Zoltán in in 1945 by the U. S. Army 109
Zoltán in Paris June 1945 120
Zoltán in Paris 1947 120
Zoltán with a group of dental technician apprentices 162
Zoltán and friends at a picnic 162
Zoltán with M and Mme Prager in Paris 162

1 NYIRCSAHOLY, HUNGARY, 1935.

The paths and roads are nothing but deep mud, puddles lie here and there, their surfaces still, so that from certain angles I can see myself reflected in them, the images upside down. Patches of snow are still visible in the fields, and on the trees the little buds look like pale green pointed heads that the sun has enticed to emerge from the tree's winter-moribund body. The icicles have disappeared from under the eaves but the corners are still dripping from hidden sources of moisture in the roof.

Our house, one among many in a row all similar, was built of mud bricks and had a thatched roof. It had three rooms and a hall, which, among other uses, also served as a kitchen. The front room was a shop with a door to the street. A bell hung over this door to warn when it was opened. In the shop we sold groceries, but since the customers rarely had any money, they usually brought goods, which we sold or traded again to other customers. They might bring a dozen eggs in exchange for some sugar, salt and yeast. These were among the basic necessities. From the shop a door led to the second room, where the family mainly lived. There were two beds in it, neatly made up with our eiderdown quilts and pillows piled high in orderly shapes. A divan, a wardrobe and a chest of drawers stood around the walls. The wardrobe door was carved with figures, which to my child's eye resembled chicken livers. The room was quite large and not crowded even though a great table with seven chairs around it sat in the middle; a vase of flowers stood in the centre of the table.

The roof-beam ran the length of the room and above it the ceiling was of brown painted planks. Between the beam and ceiling there was a gap where an ancient, battered, concertina-sided leather wallet was hidden. I could not help noticing the care with which my parents took down and replaced this wallet, lest some scrap be lost. This was where they kept all the valuable documents of the family, such as birth and marriage certificates – both civil and religious – receipts from the bank (to where my father trekked every three months without fail to pay the mortgage on our house), my father's army discharge papers showing where he had served, and for how long, my brothers' and sisters' school report cards, as well as banknotes saved up for the next mortgage payment.

The entry-hall-cum-kitchen was next, followed by the third room, used for sleeping as well as storing goods for the shop. The hall, or rather, kitchen wall, was covered with shelves except where there was the large brick oven with the chimney above it.

The stables for the cow (my mother's responsibility) and the horse, which was my father's aid in the business, were in a separate building behind the house, with the dung heap conveniently near. The lavatory was next to the stables, not quite so convenient.

We shared the well with our neighbour. Its water wasn't drinkable but we used it for the animals, for cooking and washing. The well was located by the fence just at the entrance to the garden proper. The area beside the house was referred to as the yard and it was about four metres wide, always dotted about with hens, ducks and geese, many generations of whom had hatched there.

Our garden ran about three hundred metres further but was only eight metres wide. Every kind of vegetable for the kitchen, like lettuce, carrots, parsnips, parsley, cucumbers, tomatoes, onions and garlic, grew in it. Crops like potatoes, beans and corn, of which larger quantities were needed, grew in the so-called large garden at the rear. Fortunately, the gardens supplied most of our needs, for money was scarce and had to be reserved for essentials like fuel for the winter, which in our district was harsh enough to necessitate heating from October to April. Shoes and clothes also had to be bought, although my mother used every scrap of material to its last thread, turned garments inside out to prolong their lives, remade and recombined, so that we managed with little. Enough fuel had to be bought in the autumn, to last through the winter, and this expenditure ensured that most of the families faced the winter with near empty pockets. Then came taxes.

Seven of us lived in our house, five children and our parents. Quite often visitors came to stay for varying periods as well. My father was a big man, tall and powerful. He didn't have to strain to pick up a seventy-five kilogram sack of beans onto his shoulder and throw it on to the cart. He was hard working, strong rather than smart. He spoke little and heard less, for he had served with the artillery during the First World War and it had left him somewhat deaf. He often took me with him on the cart and let me hold the reins while he sat next to me, humming to himself.

He would tell me about his early life, particularly of his time in the army, as we sat there behind the horse during the slow journeys. He was the only one available for carting in the village.

On Saturday nights, at the end of the holy day, he would be on his way to the next village, which had slaughtering facilities, to fetch the meat. I was allowed to go with him as far as the butcher's, whom he picked up on the way. He would sing out, "I'm here, Moric." Back came the answer, "Coming, Sándor." That was the signal for me to get off and run home. He was paid in kind so we were rarely short of meat.

Every time he went into town to visit the wholesalers for our own shop, he would bring back goods for all the other shops too – for a fee of course.

"See this hand," he would say, holding out his right hand with its roughened palm, "it was shaken by the Emperor Ferenc

József when he visited my unit." But even that honour had not compensated for having had to learn all the parts of the cannon as well as the words of command in German. "Each cannon has thirty-two 'cuge', whatever the devil they are," he used to say. We children thought it hilarious and shouted "cuge, cuge" to each other to evoke laughter for many years.

The story that impressed me the most concerned an occasion when he was sent out on patrol, together with a newly arrived replacement, while he was on the Italian Front. They met a two-man Italian patrol as they were traipsing about in the forest. The enthusiastic newcomer snatched his rifle from his shoulder and was about to shoot but my father stopped him and pulled him behind a bush to hide. The two Italians, young men just like themselves, settled down for a smoke and a rest immediately in front of their bush. Father and his offsider, rifle in hand, executed a perfect encircling manoeuvre and confronted the two stretched-out figures before they could make a move to defend themselves.

"There we were, looking at each other like the deadly enemies we were," he said, crossing the fingers of his two hands to show me, "without speaking. It was no use, of course, we couldn't understand each other's language anyway. We stood like that for what seemed a long time and then slowly, without words, we reached an understanding. They were already lying down, so we two also settled ourselves comfortably and had the best, most relaxed, the only undisturbed sleep of the whole war. When we woke up we parted and returned to our units." He finished the story with the classic fairy-tale ending, "And they are still alive if they haven't died."

He used to get up at first light, no matter what the weather, and go outside to tend the animals. But before venturing out he would fortify himself with a nip of plum brandy and then give himself a quick booster, straight out of the bottle, every time his comings and goings took him near it. On especially cold mornings his speech would be somewhat slurred by the time we sat down to breakfast, having had occasion to draw on reinforcement three or four times.

Mother was petite with an abundance of black curly hair. Her name was Lenke. She must have been a stunning beauty when she was young, before she gave birth to seven children, two of them stillborn. Her parents were reasonably well off and knowledgeable about farming. Their garden was five times the size of ours. My grandfather had been a hussar in the Hungarian cavalry, of which he was extremely proud. He, too, dealt in fruit and produce, his business coming to a sharp peak in autumn, when he rushed about a great deal from farm to orchard to town and back home to Fábiánháza, the next village to ours, about five kilometres away. This was where mother had acquired her expertise in agriculture. The sum of her schooling was four years of primary school but there seemed no limit to her knowledge and her capabilities. I never saw her idle; even her Saturday rest was purposeful. She was forever washing or baking, sewing, cooking, patching, ironing, tending the garden or serving in the shop. She embroidered beautiful pictures in fine silk thread, could hold her own with the best in spinning and weaving and was the only one in our family who could milk the cow.

The psalmist had her in mind when he wrote: "A woman of worth who shall find ..." and about whom the saying: "Her family is her life and her life belongs to her family" must have originated. On Sundays, when she visited her parents, we set about our tasks dispiritedly. I tried to finish mine quickly in the hope that time would imitate my speed. At least half an hour before she could possibly be expected to return, we would all drift to the front of the house from where her returning figure could first be glimpsed and we would sit in a forlorn row waiting for her. Even father refused to go inside where it was cold and empty without her.

Of my two sisters, the elder, Anna, was small and plump. She loved to eat and to play with her dolls. She was a willing aid to mother in any activity connected with food. She had a benevolent outlook on life and preferred to see only the good in everyone. She had a strong maternal instinct and when I was little she used to take me on her lap and pretend that I was one of her dolls come to life.

The younger, Rozsa, was dark like our mother, but tall and willowy, her expressive face surrounded by thick, curly dark hair. She was the star performer in every school play, not only because of her obvious talent and liking for acting but also because of her beauty and strength of character. She had no trouble learning her lines, as she had an excellent memory. Her thoughts were in a fantasy land where she travelled the world in a fairy-tale carriage pulled by magic horses that knew where her prince was awaiting her and were speeding her there. According to mother this would have been an ideal situation for certainly any ordinary mortal who married her was liable to starve. She loved to dress up in mother's clothes and could imitate people's voices and mannerisms well enough to deceive even their mothers.

Andor, my eldest brother, was also tall and was the only one of us who cared about his appearance. He was apprenticed to the only tailor in the village. He received no wages, his only income was the occasional tip he might receive. He loved reading and hoarded every bit of print he could find. Saturday afternoons he spent in Bible study. Mother was very proud of him. He was much older than the rest of us and often spanked my other brother, Viki, and me because we teased him about his 'elegance'.

Victor was the closest to me in age but not close to any of us in nature. He detested school and stayed away to help father as frequently as he dared, much preferring to heave heavy sacks.

He often played with me and made me the privileged passenger in the go-carts and sleds he was constantly fabricating from odd scraps of discarded material he found around the countryside, and to which he harnessed, without favouritism, any of our livestock that happened by at the fateful moment when the conveyance was completed. Our calf, or the gander, even the neighbour's dog, all came in for their share and all took a dim view of the proceedings, even though they all adored him, for he used to distribute his Saturday morning's portion of cake amongst them, in the mistaken belief that if he didn't eat it he would not be obliged to go to synagogue. Mother often despaired of his future. She should in fact have worried more about mine, for I was invariably tipped out at the first swerve the creatures made and was forever in peril of my bones, if not my life.

I was six years old that spring of 1935, and could hardly wait for the beginning of the school year in September so that I, also, the youngest of my family, would be a schoolboy at last. The building of the new school had already begun. Until it was finished I would attend school in the second room of a house very similar to our own.

Our village was in the north-eastern corner of Hungary, in the so-called Nyirség, a sandy, flat area. One of the lesser rivers, the Kraszna, flowed about two kilometres from the village. A wide variety of crops grew in the fertile soil — wheat, rye, potatoes, beans, corn, watermelon, grapes, apples, walnuts and plums were all produced in marketable quantities. Decorative trees, such as acacias, lilacs and wild chestnuts, also grew in profusion.

The four main streets of the village formed the letter X and the important buildings, such as the village hall, were located at the square where the streets crossed. It was called The Market although no markets were ever held there. The roadway, wide enough for two carts to pass, was paved in the vicinity of the square but not the footpaths. There were eight shops, including ours, that between them supplied everything from pencils to ploughs. If an item was not in stock, someone would get it for you, for every customer was a life-long customer. But relationships were not always easy and many times I saw my mother torn between the wish to oblige and the anxiety of whether she would ever see payment for the many items bought on credit. More often than not she would sigh and mark up the new purchase, not even mentioning the sum already outstanding, which, to us, seemed large. If she had, the chances were that the customer would have taken umbrage and gone elsewhere to spend her cash, whenever she happened to have any.

The five thousand or so souls who lived in the village worshipped, each according to his faith, in the synagogue, or in the Catholic, Protestant or Greek Orthodox churches. Only about ten families were Protestant and about twenty Jewish, the rest, in about equal proportions, were Catholic or Greek Orthodox. We had two church schools and I, together with every other Jewish and Protestant child, was enrolled in the Orthodox school because the Catholics accepted only Catholics. There was no state school. We had a Jewish school, a *cheder*, but this was not an ordinary day-school since there were not sufficient numbers to warrant its upkeep. We went there in the early mornings and late afternoons, before and after regular school, to learn Hebrew, Bible studies and prayers, as well as the myriad other things a Jewish child was expected to learn.

It is difficult to imagine now how we managed to live without television, theatre, movies, radio or newspapers and magazines. There was not even a library. This was where the main difference between the Jews and the Gentiles became apparent. In that cultural vacuum there was no opportunity to improve our minds once school was over. The Gentiles would concentrate on sport, gambling and drinking, while we pursued our age-old religious studies of the holy books with which a Jew is never finished. Consequently, the cultural level in a Jewish home was generally higher and learning of every kind energetically encouraged and admired. No matter how hard a person had to work to earn a living, Saturday was set aside for rest and study of the laws and commentaries, the explanations, arguments and counter-arguments of the learned rabbis back through Akiva, Hillel and Shammai, who lived in Roman times, to the earliest sages who returned from Babylon with Ezra and Nehemiah. These were the studies into which my brother Andor delved during his Saturday afternoon sessions while I was out playing soccer with the boys. Father preferred a good afternoon sleep.

Religion played a very important role in the lives of our people. Since we had inherited it, each in his several ways, together with tradition, we resisted any form of change and were content to continue in the ways of our ancestors.

When the priests preached an Easter sermon about how the Jews tormented and crucified Jesus who had come down from heaven to save them, carefully omitting any mention of love and brotherhood which He preached, they engendered enough murderous hatred to last any self-respecting Christian the rest of the year. Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, could have taken lessons from them.

The Torah, the set of laws we received at Sinai, was dinned into us at *cheder* from the age of three onwards because it was considered to be a perfect recipe for the good life, a sort of manufacturer's instructions on how to live in peace and harmony with each other — a holy and precious gift from G-d. But instead of applying its precepts to turn 'swords into ploughshares', I felt it had become a bludgeon with which people hurt one another.

I have not followed my brother Andor's example in pursuing his studies, but what I did learn, and carry with me still, was to respect every single religion in so far as it is on the side of life, but as soon as it is used to satisfy power hunger, justify envy, jealousy, intolerance, contempt, humiliation, hatred and killing in G-d's name, I cannot help but be convinced that we would be better off without it.

There were three large properties that belonged to the village. One was Sándor Egri's, where about ten families worked the various farms and holdings. He himself lived on the nearest farm and drove about in a carriage and pair. He looked like a typical kulak (although the word was not yet in use in those days) with his bulging stomach and red cheeks. On any matter of public interest his opinion was sought first; in any argument his word was last.

The Budaházys, owners of the next large property, were aristocrats. They had a beautiful manor house, planted about with poplars which provided privacy and shade — it was a shame that they hardly ever took advantage of all its bounties. They lived in the capital and had an overseer to manage the place, with the help of about twenty families. Sometimes in winter a hunt was organised and the dozens of dogs they kept finally saw some action. Pink-coated figures rode sleek stallions or geldings that bounded with ease over the barbed-wire fence surrounding the property, in pursuit of the rabbit, hare or fox — whatever they could scare up.

The largest property, comprising half the village, provided two hundred or so families with a living on its two large farms. The owner, Ármin Berger, and his family also lived on the property, out of which they gained a comfortable income. A manager as well as an overseer helped to ensure the smooth running of such a large and extensive operation. Mr Berger lived half the year in his palatial home where a gardener was employed exclusively to tend the flowers. Four magnificent horses pulled his coach and they could often be seen galloping through the village, with Mr Berger holding the reins.

The property boasted an excellent wine. When the harvesting was done, the entire village was invited to a ball, which lasted all night and was complete with gypsy music and as much wine, both new and old, as one could drink. Several pigs, nurtured from birth for the occasion, gave their all so there was nothing lacking for the harvest celebrations, which were famous throughout Hungary. The sweet, new wine and rich food caused upset stomachs in half the village so that for days after the feasting one could see sickly, drooping people with a yellow tinge that even their suntan couldn't camouflage.

The village girls wore red laced vests over white embroidered blouses. Their full, gathered, many-layered skirts swayed and swished on the leather of their high-heeled boots, red, to match the vests, as the girls twirled in rhythm with the spirited music.

The boys were resplendent in black, tightly fitting trousers tucked into black boots. Their embroidered, wide-sleeved white shirts covered muscles that were well developed from the hard work they had put in through the summer. The ensembles were topped off with narrow-brimmed pork-pie hats decorated with feathergrass stuck into the band to wave and nod, as if in approval, at every step. As long as the gypsies played, there was never a lack of willing dancers, no matter how tired they might have felt an instant before, during the short break between dances.

Bullocks, black-skinned and flat-horned, were used to work the fields. All summer they drew in long, slow breaths hoping to scent the first rain as they patiently trudged under their heavy yokes. When the long-awaited rain turned the soil into a mud-bath for them in the autumn, they didn't bother to hide their love for it and couldn't be persuaded out of their wallows, no matter how urgent the unfinished harvest, until they themselves considered they had had enough.

Every winter there seemed to be a few families who had failed to lay in sufficient fuel. They would have to chop down a tree or two and get it home as best they could. The same with hay for the poor cow, mooing hungrily in the stable. Perhaps it was bad luck — more often it was bad management. They would load up a cartload from Berger's stack and attempt to sneak it home, but everybody knew. What wasn't known was whether the manager didn't know or didn't want to know. His name was Winkler and my father often had business dealings with him – as did most people.

My family's roots were in the village, my ancestors of several generations having been born there. Every Jewish family in the village was related in some way, in some cases several times over – by blood, marriage or godparenthood. My father's three brothers also lived there with their families.

My mother, and sometimes the whole family, visited my grandparents every Sunday. We would travel by cart or, when there was snow, by sleigh, pulled by our horse. Their village was another muddy village, like ours, laid out on the same plan. The middle of the road was strewn with pebbles. In our village, there was not even that slight protection for the pedestrians who, in spring and autumn's wet weather, were obliged to hop over the puddles on the footpaths. On rainy days they received a double portion of the showers whenever a carriage was driven along at a pace even slightly faster than a walk.

Our village boasted a rivulet flowing through the middle, eventually to join the Kraszna. It had no name, we simply referred to it as 'the river'. There was an artesian bore next to it from which the water continually bubbled, steaming in the winter as it spouted from the pipe to freeze on the rim of the basin all around, and tingling cold in summer. I can still feel its freshness on my tongue. Viki and I used to fetch our drinking water from it in huge containers that were so awkward to carry that we had sloshed half the water onto our legs by the time we got home.

Opportunities for making a living were varied. A few of the farmers could afford a four-horse carriage as well as several pairs of oxen for the heavy work, but mostly they had small-holdings and worked the land with the aid of a pair of horses harnessed to the plough and, as the occasion arose, to the carriage as well. Another large group had only a tiny scrap of land, or none at all, and for these life was hard, for they had to eke out their living as day labourers on others' land or else they worked on the road gangs where the wages were so low that they could only afford the bare minimum. Our lives were monotonous but quiet and secure. Grapes grew in abundance and many farmers made enough wine to last them the whole year besides what they sold.

There was yet another group of people, about twenty gypsy families, who lived apart from the village populace and didn't belong to any religious group. They would make a bid for the carcass of any diseased animal that no one else would touch, and eat it! They never had regular work and they lived in mud hovels outside the village, cooking their food over open fires. Their children wore no clothes and, in spite of compulsory universal education, never attended school. Consequently, they could neither read nor write; perhaps they were not even aware of the existence of script, but they could play the fiddle as if by magic, seemingly without ever having had to learn, certainly without reading music. No festive occasion was complete without them, they knew all the latest tunes and could create an atmosphere of gaiety that I have never seen surpassed. In all the wide world not even the most famous musicians could play better.

Chief among the many things I couldn't understand about them was that they were willing to come to the houses to do paltry odd jobs for the sake of a well-used pair of trousers or shoes, which were thrown to them as payment. They used to glean the harvested potato fields for the few worm-eaten tubers that may have been overlooked by the farmer. This meant having to dig up and rake over the entire field — hard, back-breaking work and certainly less reward for more labour than if they had been in regular employment.

The only regular employment they could be said to engage in was the making of mud-bricks, for this was their 'profession' also very hard physical labour. It necessitated their treading, for days on end, mud mixed with chaff. It was not just any old mud but a special black kind, which they knew where to find in the district. After this treading by way of kneading they could judge when the sticky substance was ready and they placed and patted it into frames and dried it in the sun. The bricks thus obtained were excellent and many of the houses, some over a hundred years old, were built of them and were still as good as new.

The combination of fiddler and brickmaker as occupations always struck me as the symbol of their non-conformism. Whenever my uncle teased me about my future work he would always ask whether I would become a watchmaker or a boilermaker, these being considered the two extremes of human possibilities. Here were the gypsies, actually having pursued such extremes for countless generations! The gypsy is a unique individualist, unwilling to work under a boss or be ruled by clocks. He is a free spirit, coming and going as he pleases and doing whatever he chooses.

From the point of view of social activities, Sundays and holy days were the most important. Apart from the gypsies, everybody, without exception, was religious. Sunday morning would find them in church, which was also a good place for the young boys and girls to become acquainted.

Before the service, the events of the week, from the weather through crops to politics, would be discussed and described in the greatest detail. This was where all the gossip originated and was refreshed. Such things as who had given birth and which girl had become pregnant, and by whom, filled the holy atmosphere of the church. Accurate information was available, down to details of whose haystack had been the scene of the event. This topic of conversation was of continuing interest among the women, a source of something new to discuss every week.

After church the men went to the pubs, where they drank, conversed, played bowls or cards as long as their money lasted, for it was customary to bet on the outcome of the games. Fights often broke out; sometimes they even knifed one another. The young men went courting, on bikes, or even motor-bikes and many a hidden nook would conceal a couple in love busy ensuring the existence of the next generation.

Newspapers were not available in our village and they were a week old, if not a month, by the time they came our way from the nearest town. Only a few of the houses were connected to electricity and even fewer had a radio. Our family had neither.

Our people were hard workers, they ate a lot and they drank even more, whatever was available: wine, beer, spirits or even methylated spirits if there was nothing else. Hungarians love to enjoy themselves and need no excuse to play music, to dance, to get drunk. The end, however, would always be the same, there would be a fight. We didn't have a police station so the fights generally lasted as long as the strength of the combatants. The gendarmes would arrive next morning from town and try to sort out who had done what to whom and the suspects were carted off to jail.

Working hours were from dawn to dusk six days a week. In summer this meant up to seventeen hours of hard physical labour in the fields: ploughing and sowing in spring, hoeing and harvesting in summer, gathering the produce in autumn. In winter the tools and the very few machines that were in use in those days were looked to and kept in repair. Winter was also the time when the houses and stables and other farm buildings were repaired, for this was when work in the fields was minimal.

The summer days and evenings were so full of work, both in the fields and around the house, that it was rare for all the jobs planned for the day to be completed. It was usual to get up at first light, about five o'clock, and carry on till ten at night.

In winter, when it was already dark at three or four in the afternoon, the women would arrange feather-stripping and flax-spinning parties for the long evenings, a social as well as a creative occasion. A great deal of flax was grown in our district and the processing started straight after the harvest in autumn. The flax plant grows to about two metres in height and is quite dry and brittle by the time it is cut. After cutting it is allowed to dry further, then it is placed on simple wooden frames where it is broken — a hard and tiring job. Long, quite fine, hair-like threads are left, which are readied for the spinning by repeated combings and various soakings. By this time the winter, the season of spinning, has set in.

In our village, twenty to thirty women were invited to the spinning parties, each with her own rock and reel. This was a stick about a metre and a half long, similar to a broomstick, with a flat triangular base, joined at the edge. The base was placed on the chair for the spinner to sit upon so that the stick was held upright without engaging a hand for the purpose. At the top a ribbon was fixed and with this the bunch of flax was held so that threads were pulled from it, with the aid of the reel, as the spinning progressed. Neighbours and relatives would make up the numbers and doughnuts and tea with rum would be served for refreshments. Continuous chatter, gossip and the exchange of news was an integral part of the almost nightly event, which took place at each house in turn.

When all the flax had been spun the wooden weaving frames would be set up. With the admixture of other coloured threads a fine material would grow from under the frame. This was made up into underwear, tablecloths or any other item of clothing or linen, all suitably decorated with fine embroidery, that was required for a girl's glory-box.

Every time a goose or duck was killed during the year its feathers would be collected and put away for the long winter evenings' occupation and chatter. The fine down was separated from the stiff pointy stem which, if put into pillows and eiderdown quilts would poke holes through the angin and ruin it.

In the meantime the men would gather at some other neighbour's house, or at the pub, to smoke their pipes and drink wine while discussing the current world events – whatever had at last penetrated through to our remote village.

Outwardly, the Jews lived a similar life, except that our Sabbath was observed on the Saturday. Friday was devoted, from time immemorial, to the preparations for its proper celebration. By the time we children were awake, mother had kneaded and formed the bread for the week as well as the special, decorated loaves for Friday night, Saturday noon and evening's use. The bread was baked first and spread its delicious aroma far and wide, to mingle with the similar scents issuing from the other houses and announcing to the unaware: Shabbat is coming. Nor was this all, for mother also baked little sweet braided cakes of the brioche type, which we had with hot coffee after synagogue service on Saturday morning, in honour of the day.

By about ten o'clock all the baking was completed and we could turn our attention and energies to cleaning and cooking, all of which had to be finished before sunset. Dragging out the heavy furniture so that the floor could be swept and washed was very hard work, just like the manoeuvring of the large cast iron presser containing hot coals with which all our garments were ironed All considered work for the 'weaker sex'. The clothes were put away and no effort was spared to transform the house out of its everyday appearance into one fit to receive royalty.

The cooking came next, every item on the menu set down by tradition and little varied from week to week. There was stuffed fish for entree, then the world-famous chicken soup the noodles for which Anna kneaded, rolled out and cut, followed by the chicken boiled in the soup. This was accompanied by *tcholent* on Saturday, to which it is nothing less than criminally derogatory to refer to as oven-baked beans with barley, for the term conveys nothing of the delicate flavour combined with robust nourishment derived from it. There was a *kigel* or a *helzel* baked in with it. These are made from flour mixed with fat and spices, and in the case of the *helzel*, the mixture is stuffed into the neck skin of the chicken, duck or goose and in the case of the *kigel*, the mixture is made more firm and is patted into shape to fit into the pot on top of the beans. I have no doubt the idea was originally to eke out the meat and beans but it had become a delicacy in its own right over the years — according to the mystics, due to the merit it acquired by contact with the holiness of the Shabbat. Usually we had a prune or other fruit compote for dessert — the only occasion of the week when we could afford such luxury. In the meantime, amidst all this cooking for later, mother had to satisfy our immediate hunger as well.

Bathrooms were unknown. We got out the large enamel bowl and ladled water into it from the pot heating on the stove and washed from crown to heel, one after the other, afterwards donning our crisp, clean clothes, sometimes still hot from the iron. Father put out the animals' food ready for them, so it would take a minimum of effort to feed them, a chore that had to be done, like milking, in spite of the holy day's ban on work. At sunset, all the tasks having been completed – sometimes in a last-minute hurry – mother took out the stiffly starched embroidered white tablecloth, apron and matching kerchief, one to decorate the table, the others herself. She placed the candles into the candlesticks, the special loaves on the table, covered with the cloth, and beside them the wine. All her movements were deliberate, almost ceremonious, compared to the previous haste. She closed her eyes and raised her arms to receive and welcome the Queen Shabbat who, according to her, had just that moment crossed our threshold.

The men went off, first to the *mikveh,* the ritual bath-house, and then to the synagogue for the hour-long service. Mother and the girls enjoyed a little rest and chatter until, on our return home, we would all sit down for the meal. We had only the candlelight for illumination and it leant such a discriminating light, pointing up whatever was shiny and beautiful on the table but hiding in shadow what was less so, that it created a special atmosphere. It was easy to think of it as holy. I have often tried to recapture it but, somehow, the result always fails to measure up to my memories.

On Saturday morning the men again went to pray. The service lasted about two and a half hours. The portion of the week was read and discussed but, not having a rabbi, we could hear no sermon. Mother served dinner when we assembled again at home and the rest of the day was devoted to visits, repose and study. It was all governed and set down by long observed tradition.

There was a long-standing respect between the people of different religions and occupations. The farmers grew the crops and the merchants advanced the money or bought the standing crop outright, sometimes as much as six months before harvest. Prices fluctuated according to the amounts on offer. In this way, the risk was shared. This system had evolved over many years and continued to operate because it was beneficial to all. Our people had lived like that for generations.

The Jews kept their Saturdays and other holy days; the Christians kept theirs according to the tenets of their faith. We also had our superstitions, but these were shared irrespective of religion. We would pretend to spit on little babies to ward off the evil eye. Black cats meant bad luck. An old man who had lost an eye was believed to be a warlock. It was said that a cow poked out his eye with her horn when he had sneaked into her shed to put a spell on her to stop her flow of milk. In some instances the superstition was stronger than religion. No matter which religion, or what sort of family, in so far as people or animals, old or young were concerned, belief in superstition was firmly and equally held. Never would mention be made of a death or other misfortune without adding "it shouldn't happen here". Should a man be unfortunate enough to suffer some accident more than once, people would be afraid to touch him or speak to him for fear of bringing the misfortune on themselves, as though it were catching. Nevertheless, the priests had the most influence on the people in the management of their daily lives and their words were held in reverence. Sometimes, people's behaviour could be directly attributed to the last sermon delivered and quite often the priests knowingly and deliberately used the tremendous power they wielded.

The State authorities had much less power and the people had no compunction in cheating them whenever they could. The money so gained often finished up in the church coffers – but never the other way around. To deny half one's income so as to pay less tax was the accepted procedure but they never cheated on the church tithes because they feared the power above might be watching.

The law was administered from the village hall and my family, like everybody else, had as little to do with it, and kept as far away from it, as we could manage. We were law abiding because we liked to keep out of trouble.

The executive arm of the law in the village was represented not by police, as in the cities, but by gendarmes, and one of the minor pleasures of leading a straight life was to have no need whatsoever to become involved with them. They wore khaki uniforms and were entitled by tradition to pin a bunch of curved cockerel's-tail feathers to their tall, pointed black helmets. Often the first warning of their approach was the play of colours – orange, red and iridescent green – glinting in the sunlight as they rode around on their horses. Their cruelty was deservedly well known, for which they were both feared and hated. Anyone unfortunate enough to be arrested, perhaps after a fight, would be tied to a horse's tail and made to run all the way to town behind the galloping horse. If the victim should fall, he was dragged by his bound hands until he managed to resume his feet. Some arrived with little skin left on them, having been dragged three out of the seven kilometres.

Sunday morning would find the people dressed for church, the men's high-heeled boots polished, their best trousers tightly fitted into the tops, snowy white starched shirts and lots of shiny buttons on their trimmed jackets. Even their moustaches were trained and curled like the officers in the army. The women twisted and pinned their lovely long hair into a bun, the older women wore dark-coloured dresses, while the old women wore black. The young girls in pretty white or brightly coloured dresses had their hair in long plaits. It was impossible to tell who was rich or who was poor for each one was well dressed.

There was food aplenty. Each house had its vegetable garden where the needs of the family were grown, poultry kept and often pigs as well. Quite a few had at least one milking cow.

As in any small community, there was gossip, superstition, teasing and at times a sneering contempt for one another. But these formed part of the entertainment of our people and could not be dispensed with, although it was no fun becoming the butt of the village tongues. Some poor soul would be asked how many litres of soup his family had cooked from the chicken they had killed last Sunday. Two days later it would be all over the village that that particular family had cooked ten litres of soup from one tiny chicken. The acute embarrassment of the victim was both reward and spur for further efforts. Some already shy youth, whose grandfather might be the proud possessor of a magnificent moustache, would be accused of being so poor that the said grandfather was obliged to use shoe polish to stiffen his moustache because they couldn't afford the special wax. The endless embellishments as to smell and colour were a source of tittering among the more easily amused for months after. I don't know why this sort of cruel sneering was endured, because everyone eventually came in for their share of it. Perhaps it was because there was no other entertainment.

A minor but prevalent complaint was the imbalance in the proportion of income to the number of children in the families. Each couple had at least four children but there were a few with ten, and even twelve. Our butcher, Moric, had eight and it was known far and wide that he was the butcher who, by the time he had a heifer slaughtered, butchered and sold, could only buy a calf for the money he took for it.

No matter what size job he undertook, our carpenter, who had ten children, swore from sacred to profane that he was losing on it. The bright ones among us pointed out that he'd do better in that case if he ceased operations. "Why," he would ask in all seriousness, "how else will I support my family?" The overabundance of blessing in so many families was certainly hard to bear, but then, since there was neither television nor radio, child manufacture was a pleasant occupation during the long, cold winter nights.

If anyone was in serious trouble, all would pitch in and help in any way they could, but the unlucky one would often wish that he had been left in his original misery, because of all the sneering and teasing he was obliged to endure afterwards.

Thus did our folk live their lives generation after generation, with little change from one decade to the next. To everything there was a method and every method had its place in the system. As I found out later, village life is much the same all over the world. The people are hard-working, good-hearted, heartless and wicked; despising yet willing to help; selfish yet sensitive; cruel but also sympathetic; narrow-minded, religious, and yet superstitious.

The effects of the war could hardly be felt at first, except on the school system. My long-awaited school career of six years didn't provide much joy. The teachers had always been one of the main means of nurturing and spreading anti-Semitism, which the other children were not backward in emulating, echoing as it did what they often heard at home, and "bloody Jew" or "dirty Jew" would often be on their lips, though without malice, rather in the same way that they would shout "idiot" at each other.

The most unpleasant experience I had in school was with my fifth grade teacher, Antal Tóth. He once called on me to recite the lesson and as I stood up to begin he walked up to me and poked his cane into and about my ear so that every word flew straight out of my head.

"Well, well, smarty," he jeered, "so-called descendant of G-d's chosen, don't you know the lesson?" I used to take trouble over my work and was proud of the neat appearance of my books, but from then on I counted the hours until I could quit school and studied just enough to pass, having lost all my enthusiasm.

As much as I had been longing to go to school like my elder brothers and sisters, I landed in trouble almost as soon as I got there. In those days it was contrary to the school rules to be left handed and when my first grade teacher came upon me attempting the letter 'b', with my highly illegal left hand she was horror-struck. She immediately had recourse to the teacher's standby on such occasions: she called for my mother. That poor parent knew the way to the school only too well, having trodden it on many previous occasions, along with the other Jewish parents, in the never ending and insoluble dispute over Saturday school attendance which the school demanded and the Jewish community rejected. This particular problem wasn't really the children's concern, for generations of scholars had gladly left it in their parents' management, only grumbling at the long essays and other punishments which were regularly inflicted upon them by their teachers in their frustration at "this stiff-necked people".

My, by this time idle, left hand and its crime were nearly forgotten by the teacher when my mother was again called to the fount of culture in order to be informed that I needed glasses. At first this was a source of pride but later of much trouble for I was mercilessly teased as "four eyes" or "double eyes". I flung the glasses into my schoolcase where they eventually broke. Without them I couldn't read and my parents flatly refused to keep buying me new ones. I am sure that my joy, when I finished school, was greater than when I began. What is more, it was a joy that was shared by many.

There was never any question of my going on to high school for there wasn't one in the village — not many went to the towns to continue their education because of the difficulties and expense of boarding — and Jewish students were barred from public high schools by this time. The war was in full spate and had spread its malevolent effects to the village, where life became harder for everyone, although the authorities injected a little extra 'bitters' for the Jews.

I left my village at the age of fourteen and went to Budapest, where there was greater opportunity to learn a trade. My brother Andor was already there, working as a tailor. He had come home for the autumn holy days in 1942 and I had begged and pestered him to help me to leave the village. As it turned out, this probably saved my life.

After his return to Budapest Andor wrote to tell me that he had managed to place me in a tailor's workroom where I would be apprenticed. I had been in a fever of excitement the whole of the previous week, without knowing the cause, as if I could sense that his letter was on the way. He wrote that he would meet me at the station and named the day I was to catch the train. My mother at once immersed herself in the work of mending and patching my clothes. She prepared various foods for me as well, she roasted a chicken, baked bread and a special kind of scone made with crackling, well known for its suitability for taking on journeys because of its excellent keeping qualities. She wrapped and packed everything carefully into a woven bamboo case.

The preparation: washing, mending, cooking, baking, all for me, was the most exciting event of my young life. The whole family came out to the station with me, about a kilometre and a half from our house, a good hour before the train was due. We stood in a tight knot in front of the board that had the name of our village, Nyircsaholy, written on it, of which the local patriots among us had always been so proud.

My father was the only experienced traveller there. In 1910, when he had completed his compulsory military service, he had migrated to America where he spent four years working in a car factory in Detroit. In the summer of 1914 he returned to the village to marry his sweetheart, but she was already married. (I was so glad, I wouldn't have liked her for my mother, although her children loved her as much as I did mine) .

Soon after his return the First World War broke out and he was called up. He changed his savings into Hungarian money and deposited it in a savings bank. Now, as I was about to embark on a journey, albeit not as far as America, his oft-told tale had special poignancy.

"The war lasted four years," he said, "and we finished up on the losing side. I had been taken prisoner by the Italians and by the time I came home galloping inflation had chomped up my thousand dollars worth of crowns, the savings of four years. I bought a box of matches with it!"

"My son," he went on, "I am proud that you have decided to 'take your bundle and try your fortune in the wide world'. I hope you will be more successful than I. You will have to deal with, live with, strangers. True, you will be able to understand them. I couldn't take it. I was very unhappy in America. The food was foreign, the language was incomprehensible, I felt like a lost lamb among the wolves, although, had I been able to use my thousand dollars after the war I would have been rich ... Never mind, the devil took it.

"Look after yourself, be brave and strong. Don't let anybody push you around. Face up to your problems, don't postpone them, and you'll always find a way to solve them."

Mother just stood there quietly weeping and listened to all the wise advice father was giving me. She could not think what it was like to travel by train — every time she had occasion to go into town she went by cart or walked. The girls clamoured, "Why can't we go too?" Only Viki was glad that he did not have to leave home. He had worked it out that with his two brothers out of the way he would inherit father's business, although, as it turned out, he later joined us in Budapest.

Standing there on the platform, I only heard with half an ear and felt with half a heart the tearful, fearful farewells, for the tension, the excitement of my imminent departure almost overwhelmed me.

Sándor, Father of Zoltán

Viki in Bucharest 1944.

Zoltán in 3rd Grade

2 BUDAPEST

I had never travelled on a train before. I used to gaze with open mouth whenever I saw one going by in the distance, my head full of fantastic imaginings. I used to picture trains magically connecting the whole world (consisting of Hungary, Paris and London), as if by strings.

When, after the many preparations and long farewells, I finally boarded the train and sat down in my seat, the train started and it suddenly struck me that I had left my home, that I was by myself and surrounded by strangers. I wept. For a long time I couldn't stop crying. I think I cried from fear, for I felt like a lost child.

The train drew into Western Station in Budapest after an all-night run. I had finally comforted myself with the knowledge that Andor would be waiting for me. He did wait, but because of the throng we failed to see each other. I followed the crowd out of the station and went to inquire the way to his lodgings. It was carefully explained to me to catch a number six tram and get off at the sixth stop. I found the place without any trouble, but no brother! The landlady told me that Andor had gone out to the station to wait for me. He had waited two hours, running all over the station, and gave up only when he had looked for me in every likely, and some unlikely, places. When he arrived back home and saw that I was all right, he couldn't decide whether to be glad or to beat me up for not having obeyed his carefully worked out instructions – for having left him there to wait and worry while I had strolled out of the station at my ease.

We hugged and kissed each other and went to a lunch-counter for breakfast, which was another new experience for me for I had never 'eaten out' before. There were no restaurants in the village nor could we have spared money for such things.

When I had had enough sleep Andor took me to the master tailor to whom I was to be apprenticed, but somehow it didn't work out. I was less than charmed by the place and they failed to be impressed by me. I caught a whisper of "... left-handed tailor ...". By mutual agreement we came to the conclusion that we didn't suit each other.

More than a million and a half people lived in Budapest at that time in apartment blocks similar to the one in which Andor and I rented a room. They were built joining one another, some even six storeys high.

The main entrance was large enough to admit a carriage and had double winged doors with a little door built into one side that gave access to the interior courtyard and staircases. These doors were closed at ten at night by the resident concierge who, if you were late returning, had to rouse himself, amid cursings and complainings, and open the little door to admit you. He had to be mollified with a tip and this so called gate-money was a substantial portion of his income, which was nominal, although he did live rent free.

Our concierge, willy nilly a tool of the authorities like his colleagues, reminded us the first time he saw us that it was compulsory to register all residents within three days of arrival or of moving to a new address. Andor took me to the local police station to fill out the form in triplicate, have it authenticated and lodge one copy with them. The duplicate had to be passed on to the concierge for him to hand in after countersigning. The third copy, duly stamped and signed, remained with the resident so that he could prove that the law had been complied with. The fifth question on the form was religion.

Andor worked on night shift as a tailor in a government-run war plant, so he needed to sleep during the day. It took me two or three days to get an idea of the general layout of the beautiful city – twin cities actually – Buda, the old city, steeply hilly with narrow streets and serpentines, dominated by the cathedral and citadel; and Pest, which is flat. The two cities are divided by the broad, shiny, twinkling waters of the Danube and laced together by the succession of bridges.

Full advantage had been taken by the planners of the flat topography, and lovely wide avenues crossed the boulevards, laid out on a simple and logical plan, all of which I roamed with eyes and mouth agape with wonder. I inspected everything that interested me – that is to say, everything.

After a while I, too, managed to ignore the roaring, speeding trams, the many cars whizzing by — in the village the whole population turned out to catch a glimpse when one strayed our way — and the drays drawn by powerful draughthorses, but overloaded so that the driver was forced to use his whip, which was painful for the horse to bear and for me to witness. We respected our animals and didn't treat them with unnecessary cruelty back home.

The neatly kept parks where children played – the courtyards being forbidden for this purpose; the huge squares and busy bridges, all had statues of former kings and other famous people, some on horseback, for me to admire and the pigeons to roost and lime on without anybody becoming indignant.

On windless days it wasn't such a pleasure to live in the city, in spite of the wonders of the glittering shops, imposing buildings and movies – I fell in love with the movies right away – because of the almost unbearable stinking smoke belched out by the many factory chimneys. Nevertheless, I continued my journeys of discovery. I stood in front of street vendor's stands where they roasted chestnuts and sweet butternut pumpkin, the saliva gathering in my mouth, for I had no money to 'waste.' My eyes lingered on the columns of the National Theatre, the wonders going on inside also out of my reach, and I was jostled by the passersby.

In our courtyard and on the street I was astonished to see the tradesmen who carried their shops on their backs in a specially constructed box with straps. These men were glaziers, chimney sweeps, knife and scissors sharpeners, second-hand clothes dealers, tinsmiths, who mended pots and pans, and dealers in stone dust. The last two were often accused of being in league because the stone dust was used to scour the pots and pans, which practice afterwards necessitated their frequent mending. They went from house to house crying their wares and skills in a full-throated sing-song that penetrated the many windows giving on to the courtyards. The residents in need of their services would come out to the external corridors which ran around the inner sides of buildings on every floor, from where they signalled and called out to the tradesmen.

The huge market halls where every kind of foodstuff could be bought much cheaper than in the shops and Teleki Square impressed me the most. If you ran short of money you could go to Teleki Square, take the shirt off your back and find a buyer for it within minutes. There were booths where new clothes, bed linen, antique furniture and almost every item of human need was sold legitimately, but Teleki Square was also the place to go if you were after anything illegal, like foreign currency, which through legal channels was limited to very small amounts, or imported items sold cheaply (you could be sure they were smuggled), or any item for half the price (definitely stolen). You never knew whether the thin man in the shabby hat whispering, "Genuine sterling silver dessert-spoons" out of the corner of his mouth was himself the thief or only the receiver's runner.

The streets were always noisy, if not with the many different vehicles then with the footsteps of the almost unbelievable number of pedestrians and the screams of the news-vendors. It was all so full of activity, life and the living that I gulped and gazed, thinking how different it was to 'Csaholy. I didn't know whether to be glad that I had escaped the quiet backwater of the village or cry because I had dropped into a madhouse where there was a danger that I, too, would catch the universal disease and become insane.

I went to a Jewish employment agency and was directed to a plumber in Mátyásföld who needed an apprentice. I told Andor about it and next morning boarded a train and travelled the sixty or so kilometres in about an hour. It was a pretty little town, the streets were planted with rows of trees and each house had a neat flower garden in front. I found the plumber's workshop. The boss, Lemberg, was a man in his early fifties who worked alone. I put down my bag and straight away went to work. His main business was installing and maintaining water pipes and he needed help with his tools and carrying the heavy pipes.

He had placed a bed in a hidden corner of the workshop and that was where I slept. I had to fetch my plate of food from his kitchen and eat it, alone, in the workshop. It was hard work carrying the heavy pipes, for he had neither car nor cart. All the left-overs were scraped onto a plate for my lunch. Had he shown the least satisfaction with my efforts to please him, I would not have minded so much. Back home the peasants used to have a slop-bucket into which they scraped the left-overs and fed them to the pigs. The mice and rats probably ran around the pigsties in the same way as they did in my work-shop-bedroom-dining-room.

It didn't take me long to realise that I was being treated, housed, fed and spoken to like a worthless cur. On the third day Lemberg sent me out to buy some pipes. Instead, I sneaked into the workshop, collected by belongings and disappeared. Luckily, I had enough money for the train and I travelled back to Budapest.

On my return I found Andor in bed, asleep, but it wasn't long before he woke with all the noise I made around him. There were some hours before he was due at work, so we settled down to talk. It rarely happens in life that one gets a chance to have a few hours' uninterrupted conversation as we did that day. We talked at random but seriously about everything that came into our heads.

"I don't want to be an apprentice where they treat an apprentice like a dog. I want to find a job and work for proper wages and live with you, and not in some dark corner where mice are my only companions," I insisted.

Andor agreed that I could try. The entire Hungarian system of apprenticeship wasn't to my liking. The boy had neither rights nor wages, only the occasional tips besides his keep, and his master, if he chose, could employ him on any task unconnected with his trade.

Next day I went out and found a job in a small grocery store. I had to deliver milk and bread to the customers' homes every morning, serve in the shop, weigh up goods and generally make myself useful. The pay wasn't much but there was plenty to eat in the shop. I learnt quickly what I had to do, and also to take what food I wanted without asking and then to explain afterwards if questions were asked. Often the boss put away the unsold bread rolls to dry, intending to grind them, or rather to have me grind them, for breadcrumbs, but I usually ate them before that could happen.

The job turned out to be a tremendous success. It wasn't long before I became well acquainted with all the customers, who were invariably good to me. I left after about a year because of a silly argument with my boss, the widow Roth, short in temper as well as stature. In fact I had her pictured in my mind as measuring the same up and down as sideways. She had a lot of good in her, as well as bad. Whenever she baked or cooked something that she knew I liked, she always brought me some, but if I failed to carry out a task to her satisfaction, I was obliged to listen to her endless tirades.

On that last morning she sent me to run to the fuel merchant's cellar to stand in the queue and fetch the five kilograms of wood doled out to each customer. I ran, stood, shuffled as bidden, only to have the doors shut for lunch just as I got to them. When I returned without the wood and explained what had happened, she called me "a useless, clumsy, stupid, good-for-nothing, left-footed left-hander to have stood there for four hours and come back without". I felt outraged. I had been the one who had withstood the biting wind since eight in the morning without success. I decided then and there that she had harangued me for the last time and left at once.

She was about sixty years old at that time. She had been brought up, and lived in, the Hungarian system of human relationships, accepting it as the best. Its basic principle seemed to me to be arrogance, borrowed and modified from the Germans. Everyone was carefully taught whom to despise. The nobility despised the commoners, the rich despised the poor, the Christians despised the Jews and the gypsies and, indeed, any minority amongst them, while they venerated the Germans, the English and the French. All the nations to the east and south were regarded as not quite belonging to the human race. Thus the Russians, Slavs, Poles, Romanians and Bulgarians were denied humanity. On another plane, the inhabitants of the capital despised the country folk, who couldn't hide, nor disguise, their origins longer than the first sound they uttered, for their accent gave them away. They were a constant source of cruel jeers, and the jokes in the revues were always aimed at the 'ignorant peasant' with malicious overtones mixed in the fun.

When I left the widow I found a much better paid job with a bookbinder where my work was similar, running errands and delivering, except that I had to pay for all my own food. The owner, Mr. Lövy, forty-one years old, had been called up to serve in the forced labour brigade with others of his age group, and Mrs. Lövy was running the business. She was a nimble little woman with a divine figure but no idea of handling people, nor had she any business acumen. She had promised her husband to keep going until his return and she was doing her best.

The books we bound were for children of up to four years old. Cardboard was cut to the size of the book and pictures of animals and storybook characters were glued on to it and stuck and bound into books with glue we boiled on the premises. The packing and delivery of the completed books to the wholesaler was my task and I used a two-wheeled handcart which I pushed through the cobbled streets, more tiring than if the surface had been smooth.

There was a fifteen-year-old girl apprenticed there, I no longer remember her name, who was my first love, although I never revealed my feelings to her. I let her order me about and jumped and ran to do her bidding at her least word. One day she piled a tower of pamphlets on the edge of her table and I accidentally toppled them over as I passed. I hurried to squat down and collect them and could feel her firm young body through the stuff of her overalls as I leant against her. Her sloe-black wavy hair fell to the middle of her back. She was very beautiful.

At the end of 1943 Mrs Lövy received news that her husband had been killed in the Ukraine where he had been taken with his unit to dig trenches for the soldiers. She decided to be realistic and gave up the business. She said she had no spirit left to carry on, that she had only nursed the business so he would have something to come back to and since he wasn't coming back she would be better off in a job with regular hours where she might even have a few minutes to spend with her two daughters. There were no buyers for such a business at that time so she simply shut the doors about six months after my arrival there. The workers were dismissed.

My next job was with a printer, where I worked in the same capacity. I learnt every street and courtyard in the city, particularly in the vicinity of the printery.

They did the printing for Mrs Lövy and that was how I found a job there. I used a handcart, with which I was becoming quite expert, to deliver the printed matter to the various firms. My muscles must have developed, too, for I was able to jog off with loads that once would have floored me. When there were no deliveries I used to help the typesetter to put the letters into the forms and the printer to place the forms into the press — a painstaking job requiring much patience, trial and error and accuracy, for every single item had to be on the same level and placed just so in order for the sheet to come out perfectly printed. Once the press was started a page was printed and ejected every few seconds.

It was a good job and I liked the work. I was very interested to learn how the machine operated and in every other process as well. I learned a tremendous amount while I was there but unfortunately, after about seven months, the works ceased operations. The Germans had overrun Hungary and conditions were such that it was impossible to continue and my career as a printer was over.

Andor was called up to serve in the forced labour brigade (Jews were not trusted in the army and had to join forced labour units when their age group was called up, and work with pickaxes and shovels instead of fighting with rifles). He was allocated to Budapest so we were still together. I liked that. He continued to work as a tailor, which was much easier than if he had had to work building roads, like many others. He repaired uniforms for the army.

In the meantime I had helped Viki to come up to Budapest, so the three of us were together.

The so-called 'Jewish Question' was being steadily developed by the authorities and had caused our parents' business to lose trade. This 'Jewish Question', which occupied so much of the attention of so many central Europeans at that time, could be simply stated as: how to get rid of the Jews? The complications arose when questions began to be asked – such as, who was to be regarded as a Jew? Did one include people who were baptised, though born of Jewish parents or parent; people who had married a Christian in church though they themselves had never been baptised, and all the other possible combinations and degrees? And when all that was settled, where were they to be placed, since they had to be displaced, and how?

My father maintained that the monarch always protected his minorities. According to the Encyclopaedia Judaica he was right, except in the case of Empress Maria Terezia. Ever since King Zsigmond, who ascended the throne in 1387, the Jews had been protected by the kings every time the burghers and guildmen attacked them, although sometimes with indifferent success. Nevertheless, Hungary had been amongst the first countries to allow Jews rights to pursue trades, manufacture goods and even own land. Except for the nasty episode of the Tiszaeszlár libel case in 1889 (when a Jew was accused of killing a Christian child in order to obtain his blood to bake *matzot*), Hungary had enjoyed almost a hundred years of nonviolent relationship with its minority groups. Any anti-Semitism manifested was unofficial and hardly touched the lives of religious Jews who, before the 1920s, constituted the vast majority and who had no ambition, anyway, to hob-nob with the nobility, nor had they aspirations for government jobs where Saturday was a working day. But under the Regent the golden age quickly tarnished and in the absence of the protecting monarch we lost the rights and privileges belonging to a citizen.

Our shop in the village was no longer allowed to trade in government franchised goods, such as matches, salt and kerosene, all important commodities which comprised a sizable part of the trade. This made it that much more difficult to make a living. Mother used to send us a ten-kilogram parcel every week full of home-cooked goodies and we sent home a large part of our pay. Viki and I always competed as to which of us would take more money when we returned home for the holy days. He had found a job in a hairpin factory and was infinitely satisfied with his work. Thus did our lives continue at that time, while the war raged all over the world. Many Jews were in forced labour units with the army in the Ukraine but there were no Hungarians fighting on the Western Front. In any case, both fronts were far from us as yet; we were given hardly any true information about how the war was going.

Life was not easy but it was tolerable. I was able to find and hold down a job with my fifteen-year-old's experience. I was willing to work at any job. I found conditions better than in the village, where I would have had no chance of being able to find such jobs. It seems to me the same the world over. Money collects in the cities and only a small part of it dribbles through to the country towns, and even less to the villages. I was able to work, to earn, I had money in my pocket, I was even able to help my parents, who at this time needed my help.

My two sisters remained with our parents while we boys were all together in Budapest. In those days girls, decent girls that is, would never have been allowed to leave home. It looked as if we might manage to survive the war without too many problems when we received a letter from home that official proof was required by the Ministry for Internal Affairs of our Hungarian citizenship. Mother wrote that we should employ a solicitor who would be able to settle the matter quickly as it was urgent.

I was elected to find a solicitor since my work took me to the city streets every day and I was not chained to a workbench as were Viki and Andor. Straight away I asked around my acquaintances and was given the name of a solicitor. I went to see him without delay and told him the tale. He didn't think it was of any great importance and expected he would be able to finalise it in a few days. As no mention was made of cost, I supposed there was a fixed fee. He gave me a list of all the documents he would need and I sent the request on to mother at once. She was to send us: father's birth certificate, military service certificate and discharge papers, their wedding certificate and father's parents' birth certificates. I could picture her packing up the entire contents of our leather wallet from beneath the roof.

Herewith started a runaround compared to which mice in their treadmill are full of useful purpose. My father, his parents, their parents, way back to the dim past, were all born in our village, as were all their children. This part of the country had always belonged to Hungary, unlike many border regions which seemed to change hands and language as well as allegiance with every war. The registry of births, deaths and marriages had not always been kept as accurately and as painstakingly as was now demanded. My father's eldest brother kept an inn, a pub really, and before he could obtain a permit for this he had had to take out his citizenship papers, so he was in possession of all relevant documents pertaining to their parents. Of course, my grandparents were long dead by this time.

In their day, the mid-1800s, people were generally known by their first names rather than their surnames. The matter was further complicated by the fact that we all had Hebrew, as well as Hungarian, first names. My grandmother's name was Hermina but she was also known as Hanna (her Hebrew name), as well as Helen; grandfather's name was Henri, Hebrew name

Haim. They had four sons and a daughter and each time a child's birth was registered another combination of their various names was written into the registry. Where the father's name was Henri the mother's name was Hanna; where the mother's name was Helen the father figured as Haim. This was more than the nitpicking, self-important clerks of the Fascist bureaucracy could digest. My uncle's papers proved useless to us and we had to start from scratch.

My family was Hungarian on both sides, from way back, my father served all together seven years in the army, including the time he spent as a prisoner of war in Italy during the First World War, but he couldn't manage to obtain his citizenship papers. We were obliged to spend all our money and take out a new mortgage on our house to pay the solicitor when finally, at the end of February 1944, we received the famous document. For whom or for what the confounded thing was important I don't know to this day.

In effect, the war entered the lives of all Hungarians in full brutality with the entry of the Germans into the country. They swooped, as they always did, in a blitzkrieg, even on an ally, on 19 March 1944, however, in this case, without shooting.

It took only a week to proclaim the first special edict whereby all Jews were required to wear a yellow star on their left breast, the star to measure not less than ten centimetres across, and to be firmly sewn onto the outer garment and clearly visible at all times. Failure to comply was punishable by death!

What happens to a person, what are his feelings as the rope is tightening about his neck? We had a chance to observe this on ourselves. What followed were the true consequences of the lack of resistance to the first step, the yellow star. First the victim was marked, next the location was marked. Following the first edict came another — to display a large yellow star on the gate of each house where Jews resided. Then, the hunt began.

After a few more days a curfew was placed upon Jews. Except for one hour, between eleven o'clock and noon, Jews were not allowed to go out of their homes. Thus it became impossible to buy food as the shops were emptied of all basic food items by eleven, milk, bread and vegetables being in short supply already. In the one hour allowed them, Jews frantically rushed from shop to shop trying to buy whatever might still be available, waving in vain the generously distributed ration cards in the faces of the shopkeepers, who pointed to their empty shelves by way of an irrefutable argument.

We were like cornered quarry, with hundreds of armed hunters, their guns in their hands eager for the hunt, shooting every which way just to be in it, lest they miss out. Shooting from every direction, to all points of the compass, lest they go home, for shame, without having fired a shot.

All the hard won teachings, like "love your fellow man as yourself", or "do as you would be done by" was forgotten, only the heat and thrill of the hunt, hatred and murder were visible in the eyes of the people; licensed looting of Jewish property, justified by real or imagined wrongs, and the ever present jealousy came to the forefront in their feelings and "only death" became their motto. The property of Jews, such as land and factories, had already been confiscated, now they were after their lives.

It was impossible to go to work, it was tempting fate to go out early in the morning with the rest of the workers. There were many who had no reserves of money, for one still needed to pay for whatever one managed to buy in that precious, permitted hour.

I was among those who needed to work, needed the regular wage it brought, so that I could continue to eat, even though they didn't want me to continue to live. The printery had simply closed its doors, unable to function in the general chaos. I needed to pay rent and no matter how mad the world becomes, a man's stomach is bound to grumble when he gets hungry. I could not imagine how I was going to manage.

Of all the Jews who lived in Hungary, very few knew what to do for the best. Each one held fears for his home, his job, his existence. Complete panic took hold for no one knew which way to turn.

We were in constant communication with our parents but they were just as ignorant of the best course to take as we were. They advised us to come home, saying that when danger threatens, as it obviously had, we were better off together. They were worried, too, by the constant bombing Budapest was subject to.

The entire country was like one big insane asylum; before we could reach a decision concerning what course of action to take following the last edict, a new one would be issued setting up a whole new set of circumstances and problems.

Viki and I decided to take our parents' advice and go home to be with them but when we got to the station we saw a familiar face, Moric, from our village, on his way to re-join his forced labour unit after having been at home on leave. He advised us to stay put because, according to the latest news from home, all the Jews were about to be collected from the district and taken to the town, to a collecting camp, called a ghetto. Quite apart from that, it was dangerous to travel because passengers were constantly having to show their papers on the train and if we were caught not displaying our 'star', we would disappear without trace. With a 'star', of course, we were not allowed to be out at this hour, let alone travel.

"In the small villages the Jews live in small groups and it is easy to take them, to deal with them," he elaborated. "In the capital here, among the crowd, it should be harder." What did we know of the Fascists' modern methods and precise organisation then? He persuaded us not to go, but to stay in the capital, where two boys like us would "have a better chance to get lost in the crowd" than in the village, where everybody knew everybody.

Andor had been transferred to a country town about a hundred kilometres west of Budapest with his forced labour unit. Viki decided that I had better make the decision. I concluded that we should remain, and hoped that the situation would improve. I also realised that some source of income would have to be found. I went along forthwith to the Jewish Community Centre. As I neared the place I saw that the whole street was crowded with people, each one having come to speak to somebody about his various problems and ask the advice of the officials, who had few answers. The German authorities were unwilling and the Hungarian, possibly also unwilling, but also unable to give information as to what would be the next edict to be published against the Jews. Certainly, neither of them had any intention to give aid and comfort. People were jammed into the courtyard by the thousands since it was well past the curfew hour of twelve o'clock.

Some had been hearing vague accounts of what had happened to the Polish Jews, how they had been crowded into ghettoes and taken to Germany to work and how those unable to work were put to death. For years various items of news had filtered through by way of refugees who had escaped from the ghettoes and who had reliably reported having personally seen many, many people killed without reason or cause.

We had been hearing, it seemed for a long time, rumours of a place called Auschwitz somewhere in Poland, where a large camp had been built and where people were taken, families split up, fathers, mothers and children separated, and those who were fit to work were sent to German factories where they were treated as slaves. The ones who were unfit for work, the children, the old, the sick, were each given a piece of soap and a towel and told that they were to have a shower, but that instead of water, gas came from the pipes and they were killed.

As well, we had heard that twins were experimented upon by doctors and that babies were thrown up into the air for the amusement of the soldiers so that they could shoot at them to see how many bullets hit them by the time the bodies landed. We couldn't bring ourselves to believe that they could be telling the truth. That the civilised and cultured Germans, who, like the Hungarians, were in the habit of greeting ladies with *kistihand* and who wore white gloves in summer and monocles at all seasons, could perpetrate such terrible deeds. IT WAS UNBELIEVABLE!

There must have been some among the leaders of the Jewish congregation who were aware of the truth of what had happened to the Polish Jews, whose systematic harassment had already begun in 1939. Jewish communities all over the world had good internal organisations, having distilled and perfected them over the centuries. The Budapest community was considered among the best in the 1920s and '30s, having maintained several schools, hospitals, old-age homes, orphanages and welfare and community centres, in spite of the depression. Many Jews from all over the country had reached high positions in every field, in science, in every branch of medicine, in the arts and even in politics and the army. As soon as the Germans invaded, the general community seemed to be left floundering, the flow of guidance that constantly streamed from the top was cut off suddenly, for some reason. The elders, the leaders, the wise ones were all silent.

While they still had their radios, many people listened to the overseas broadcasts in secret, along with those Hungarians who had their doubts about the regime, and who had heard about the fate of Jews in the countries conquered by Germany.

The community leaders must have known, but not they, nor the Trade Unions, the Communist Party (underground), nor the religious groups, nor, in fact anybody, gave direction to resist in any way at all. Many thousands of Jewish men were scattered in forced labour units, mostly attached to the army. If only it had occurred to somebody to organise some sort of resistance! Had the information been confirmed, had the knowledge of what we could expect been passed on, perhaps enough desperate men could have been found to do something. In Budapest, where a large and well-organised community had lived for a long time, it should have been possible to start some sort of action and not be led so obediently to the massacre.

Collection and despatch of Jews from Budapest, in the beginning mostly on foot, started in October 1944. From the country, they had been taken five months previously, surely enough time to organise. Some of the community leaders became the messenger boys of the Fascists, so to speak, confining themselves to helping those of the community who were in need, distributing clothes and blankets and boots. No doubt they never bargained for such times when they were elected to their tasks of leadership, but they failed in them. How we could have used a little of today's Israeli daring and spirit!

I managed to get into the office of the Jewish Community Centre after a lot of pushing, where I told my story. I was informed that the community had a boys' orphanage which the Germans had ordered to be vacated and made ready for their own use; I could work there on the emptying and cleaning. The community would pay. I received a certificate stating that I was working for the German army and was therefore exempt from the curfew and travel restrictions so as to enable me to get to work.

The orphanage was on the Hungaria Road, about fifteen or twenty minutes by tram from where I lived. The Germans required that the building be made ready for them within ten weeks but they were willing to provide a guard so that the Jewish labourers could function. Naturally, the community should pay the wages, hadn't the orphanage belonged to them?

About ten of us went to work. We carried the beds downstairs out of the dormitories. There was a lovely little synagogue. We had to tear out the pews and chop them up for firewood, which the neighbours stole during the night. By the morning, when we returned, no trace was left. The work was not hard. We had a Swabian boy called Fritz for a guard. He came from Sopron, a country boy in SS. uniform whose mind was as yet innocent of the confusions of war, SS, German, Jew or Hungarian.

The certificate I had received had my photograph in it and I quickly showed it when called upon, which was quite often. The work and conditions suited me for I had wages which enabled me to live and a certificate which allowed me much freedom of movement. As a sub-tenant in a tiny room where I had no cooking facilities, I would have been most uncomfortable, cooped up for long hours, if I had had to obey the curfew as strictly as the other Jews. The restrictions would have been quite contrary to my love of roaming. More often than not I would simply remove my star and walk about the streets as any Aryan. I kept a star and pins in my pocket in case I was caught in a raid. I thought that all I had to do was to pin on my star and show my certificate. Of course, this was nothing but a sop to my fears, for if I had had the misfortune to be caught by an experienced member of the Arrow-Cross (*Nyilas*) Party, the Hungarian variant of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party, nothing would have availed me. Yet, I seemed less afraid while I was out and about and I felt that while I was disobeying them, in no matter how small a way, I was getting the better of them.

I was in correspondence with Andor; Viki had been obliged, by yet another edict, to present himself for the forced labour brigade at Jászberény, but we never heard from him.

My work was bearable when a new edict named certain houses as Jewish houses and only these were permissible for Jews to live in. Those living elsewhere had to move. If the apartments were already occupied, they had to squeeze in and double up; the vacated apartments were required for the refugees swarming ahead of the invading Russians — or so rumour had it. I also had to move and ended up with a family who originally came from our village, distant relations, so I was not among strangers.

Two families, each with three members, had moved in together and they took me in, so seven of us lived in an apartment consisting of one room, bathroom and kitchen in Népszinház Street. I preferred it because I had detested living alone. For practical purposes of everyday housekeeping also, it was better in those difficult times to live together. I think all seven of us were less afraid, being with kinsmen; I know I was. One family consisted of father, mother and daughter; the other of a woman, her mother and her daughter. I fitted in well.

The last letter I had received from mother had been at the end of April. In it she said that they had to leave our home because they were being taken into the ghetto in town. They were only allowed to take a few belongings. Mother wrote that they were sharing the fate of all the Jews in our village — in our district. The family back home at this time consisted of my sister Anna, twenty-one years old and Rozsa, eighteen, my mother and father.

On the frequent occasions when I was at the Community Centre I often heard rumours that various people had received letters from relations who had been deported from the country, like mine must have been. They were supposed to have written that they were working and were being treated reasonably well.

But in spite of my constant, searching inquiries, I never came across anyone who had actually received such a letter, nor did I ever receive one.

People importuned the officials at the Community Centre for information about everything; such was the confusion that the simplest actions were fraught with difficulty and they were not surprised at questions like: how does one get from point *a* to point *b,* but mostly people asked about their relatives who had been left behind in the villages. I, too, asked, every time, for they were the only ones to whom we could turn for any sort of confirmation or denial of the many rumours. But we found that no official knew any more than we did, namely, that the Jews living in the country places were taken from their homes and concentrated into a designated small area of the nearest large district town (in our case Mátészalka) into a so-called ghetto, that walls were raised around the ghetto through which no one and nothing could pass, that they were not allowed to write letters, unless they managed to bribe a guard, and certainly couldn't receive letters, for even if we had known what address to put on the envelope, the postal authorities would not deliver them since it was not part of their plan to allow the spread of information. Quite the contrary. All this tallied with what mother had written and Moric had told us at the station. For further knowledge we had to trust to rumour, according to which the ghettoes were no longer there, all the Jews had been taken away in wagons to Germany and Poland.

Those rumours that we kept on hearing – sometimes whispered and at other times repeated with such assurance that it was difficult to believe they were merely rumours – were fuel for the scrap of hope we each had tucked away somewhere deep; we knew the information was unreliable, but it was something we could turn to. The rumours gave material for one's brain to work with, to weigh and consider: now, if this part is perhaps half true, and that other part I have heard already from another source matched it, more credence may be given there, what bearing could it have, taken altogether, on my going by way of the boulevard today rather than the back streets I took yesterday? While one was busy speculating on the proportion of reliance to be placed on a particular item, one could forget about the main, the truly insoluble, problem. That helped. Reliable, accurate, wholly believable news didn't exist for us, perhaps not even for the authorities. As to the true state of affairs on the fronts there was no information for anybody, only propaganda. We were probably better off with our 'latrine' news.

Soon after I went to live with them, my kinsfolk managed to buy some false documents for themselves, which stated that they were Christians. In spite of the fact that it cost them a small fortune (some people see a way of making money on every occasion, other people's misery notwithstanding), they were too frightened to use them.

Pál and his family were the original and long-time tenants of the apartment where the seven of us lived on the fifth floor of a building that had many Jewish residents, for it was one of the 'yellow star' houses. Pál was a gentlemanly man of about sixty, a well-to-do mattress manufacturer. The leisure hours that had now been forced upon him were spent playing cards and walking about swinging a cane, as had been his wont, whenever conditions permitted. He had fought for his country in the First World War, on the Russian Front, and he now steadfastly refused to believe the depravity to which the country had sunk – he rejected the situation in its entirety.

His wife, Joli, couldn't manage to lock herself away from reality in the same way, having all their married life dealt with the practicalities of supplying and planning the details of the household, which still devolved upon her tiny person. She spent her days in a constant state of fear — she feared that the house would be bombed, that there would not be enough to eat, that the war would last longer than their savings, that something would happen to Pál, that he would be arrested and disappear when out on his strolls, against which she was always remonstrating as an act that courted trouble. She would have liked to keep him and their daughter Márta, a stylish girl of twenty-one, at all times by her side where she could see and touch them.

Márta had decided from the beginning that there was no way a person could survive, so she took each day as it came and accepted every new one as a gift.

The other old lady was a grandmother and acted as the matriarch of the household. Her name was Erika and she also was about sixty. She had lost her husband in the First World War, her son had been sent to the Ukraine as a forced labourer and had been missing since 1942, and a daughter and grandson could not be found since they had been taken from their home in the country, presumably to Germany via the ghetto. She did all the cooking and baking. Whenever she heard somebody lamenting she would berate them and tell them to wait until real trouble struck and in the meantime to eat and sleep and enjoy what was left in life, for the country had gone insane and there was no need to contribute more madness.

Her daughter, Bözsi, was not so brave. She had been widowed soon after her daughter Kati had been born. Kati was just over ten years old at this time. Bözsi considered herself a realist, she insisted on viewing the future in the blackest terms. Kati was constantly nagging her for permission to run around the streets as I did. Of course, Bözsi wouldn't hear of it and the poor girl was confined to the tiny, crowded apartment week after week.

The close family life was not to last long. Márta heard about a factory where uniforms were made and joined its workforce with the idea that she might there be left unmolested, which, in the event, was correct. The other women were eventually taken to the ghetto in Pest, where old Pál also finished up after a spell building roads.

It would have been very lonely for me without my adopted family. Sometimes, for a fleeting moment, I felt that I might not have acted the daredevil if I had not had a home base with so many depending on me. While Viki and I had lived together we constantly defied the restrictions merely as a lark. Only the thought of our family, G-d only knew where, sobered and worried us. When Viki was called up and had to leave me, he started to fret about what would happen to me without him. He insisted on leaving all his money with me and went to the Community Centre where he was fitted out with a rucksack, clothes and boots. I was the youngest of a large, loving family and was not used to, never keen on, being by myself. I could see where I might even have despaired had I been left alone. I did my best to be of use.

A baker of my acquaintance used to put away a dozen fresh rolls for me every day, so, while the rest of the city's population obtained a loaf of muddy-looking bread with difficulty after having stood in a queue for hours, I took fresh white rolls home every day. Another task that devolved upon me was the gathering of news. Radios had been confiscated from Jews soon after the Germans entered Hungary. Newspapers didn't print what we were interested to read, although we had to buy them because they were one way we could learn of the new laws and edicts. The other way was by means of placards which were pasted on to walls and billboards, where crowds could be seen gathering in the wake of the paster. I was the sole source of information as to which district was being cleared of Jews, where such and such an item was obtainable, what was observable in the streets and all the doings of the populace.

We chopped up the furniture in the orphanage and I sometimes managed to take some home for the chip-heater in the bathroom.

Fritz enjoyed immensely his position as our guard. Instead of being an ordinary private among umpteen others in his unit, he was a commander, a boss, with all kinds of authority. One day he decided to make a party for all of us who worked at the orphanage, including Uncle Jancsi, the original caretaker, handyman-cum-overseer, and his wife Boriska. Jancsi was a quiet, good-natured man of about sixty-five, a perfect counterpoint to the fun-loving, plump Boriska, who was a devoted and good wife to him. I was the youngest among them, an ignorant country boy. Another youth, about eighteen, called Gyuri, played the violin beautifully; Károly was just fifty-five and had been a career officer all his life; Imre was a merchant of some sort, he had only one hand. He was some years older than me but well educated, and came from Györ, a large country town. I cannot remember the others. We all contributed money and Boriska cooked up a large pot of *lecsó* and baked cakes containing honey, poppy-seed and nuts. We bought drinks and the party began.

Lecsó is made from fried onions, green peppers and tomatoes with lots of highly spiced wurst and hot red paprika. It is generally served with rice. All unsuspecting, I announced that I abhorred hot spiced food and that if the *lecsó* was too spicy (my mother made it with sweet, mild paprika) I would decline the pleasure. Well! that was all that was needed.

"We cooked enough so everyone should have plenty, each one must eat his share!" recited the chorus. So I was obliged to eat my share. I made exaggerated faces of suffering *in extremis* while they all giggled and roared with laughter. I turned out to be the life of the party, which started at noon and didn't finish until eight. All I had to do was open my mouth and fan it with my hand to send everyone off into renewed bursts.

Usually, we finished work at half-past four and I was home by five. Eventually one of us pointed out to Fritz that if we tried to walk the streets at that hour it would be *kaput* for us. Fritz collected his wits and daring and telephoned headquarters. He invented a story about some important work we had had to finish so he had been obliged to keep us longer. They sent a truck and driver and delivered us home one after the other. It was close to nine o'clock when the German truck pulled up in front of my block. I clambered off, almost drunk, tottered over to the door and shouted to Fritz and the rest, "Toodleoo, I'll see you tomorrow."

The entire population of the building was congregated inside the door. By half-past five they had begun to be seriously concerned for my welfare and at eight o'clock the staunchest of them had had to concede my end. They had me dead and buried and proceeded to mourn by reminding each other how I used to bring news and whom would they look to from then on for fresh bread rolls?

When the German truck was seen to approach, general panic began to take hold for such an event boded nothing but ill and when it pulled up in front of the building their consternation was such that several nearly disgraced themselves. As I crossed the threshold, half of them were mobbing me to kiss me in their relief and the other half wanted to beat me up for having caused them such anxiety while I had been roistering with Germans.

Wild reports were passed backwards and forwards as to what we could do to save people. Every day groups of hundreds could be seen on the streets, escorted under guard, being marched away. Rumour had it that Germany was their destination.

Work at the orphanage came to an end after about three months and I was given another job clearing away rubble in a mill near the Danube, for which I continued to be paid and was issued a new certificate so I could walk the streets at all hours. There was no fear of this job coming to an end, there was enough rubble in Budapest to keep us busy for years and the bombings didn't abate. One morning at the mill a brick fell on my big toe and broke it. I had to go to a doctor who put me on worker's compensation which amounted to more than my pay, for I was paid as a boy but compensated as a builder's labourer. In all that topsy-turvy world there was still some law.

One day the Arrow-Cross men came into our building and announced that everybody between the ages of eighteen and sixty had to assemble in the courtyard within ten minutes.

The Arrow-Cross Party had been the second most popular at the 1939 elections when it had won thirty seats in Parliament. Ferenc Szálasi stood at its head, except when he was sitting in jail, and was firmly committed to a programme of chauvinism and anti-Semitism. Hungary suffered drastic mutilation after the First World War when the Austro-Hungarian Empire broke up, and any party wishing to succeed had to aspire to the restoration of territory lost by the Trianon Peace Treaty.

The essential meaning of Fascism is elitist nationalism, with the authority vested in a leader. It was Szálasi's aim to become such a leader, for Fascist he certainly was, in the mould of Mussolini and Hitler, when he founded the Party of National Will after having retired from the army in 1935. That party had had no success at the polls so he had tried again.

He appealed to a broad base of voters with his programme of land reform and Magyar domination in a Greater Hungary which would safeguard the Magyar racial purity by excluding Jews and other minorities. He had an army of thugs at his disposal, each one wearing an arm-band with the arrow-cross insignia, just like the German black-shirts. He admired Hitler and emulated him as far as he was able and received large sums from him in aid continuously. They were true allies, except for a short period in about 1943 when he fell out of favour for refusing to join a National Socialist Party coalition which the Germans were then fostering. He was often jailed by Pál Teleki, Regent Miklós Horthy's Prime Minister, who feared for Hungary's national integrity in the face of Szálasi's policy of full co-operation with Germany. Also, his fervid hatred of the Jews led him to place their deportation and extermination higher on the list of importance than the national economy, with which it drastically interfered at a time of crisis in war. Therefore, Teleki suppressed the Arrow-Cross Party as best he could, and felt that he was protecting Hungary from fanatical, extremist vandals. History justified his fears and beliefs, for after his suicide the Arrow-Cross and its thugs, no longer bridled, went on an unchecked rampage. (Szálasi was convicted and hanged in Budapest in 1946.)

Some of these thugs were the Arrow-Cross men who ordered the people down to the courtyard. The two mothers, Joli and Bözsi, fell into the age category from our group. They were marched away and rumour had it that their destination was Germany via Austria. Five of us were left in the flat.

I heard about them after the war. They had been marched to the brick factory at Óbuda where they took the first opportunity and escaped. All of us who had lived in that flat survived.

Amongst the wild rumours, one gained credence. It was said that the Swiss and Swedish Consulates were issuing documents, the so-called *schutzpaesse*, or safe conduct passports, and that all those who had one would come under the protection of whichever Consulate had issued it. Those who had money at once hired a lawyer to obtain a pass for them. I asked my fellow workers at the mill what they knew about the scheme and whether it would be possible to get one of these passes. One of the men straight away collected everybody's identity papers and left. By the evening he had brought a Swiss 'passport' for each one of the hundred or so of us. He handed them round with a satisfied smile on his dusty face and told us that he had had to wait a long time in the queue outside the Consulate for there were lots of people there on the same errand, but that there had been no raids by the Arrow-Cross men. He thought this was because they didn't want the foreign Consulate staff to witness their treatment of the Jews. Although I didn't concur with his reasoning, I didn't know any more than he did. There were rumours that the whole business was going through with the full knowledge and agreement of the Fascists, for the Germans had plans to exchange these people later for medicines and other war essentials.

Later on, by mid-November, the Arrow-Cross men randomly disregarded these 'passports' and were as likely as not to tear them up and send their owners to share the general fate. Sometimes this meant deportation, other times immediate death.

At about this time I received a letter from Andor saying that if I could obtain a pass for him he would be released from his unit and would come up to Budapest and we could be together again. What I didn't do to get that passport! I went to the Swiss Consulate at five in the morning to stand in the queue but it was already so long that you could not see where it ended. While I was standing in the queue I became very hungry so I asked the person behind me to mind my place and ducked into the nearby market to buy something to eat. An Arrow-Cross man standing at the entrance with his rifle in his arm caught hold of me and asked for my papers. He also wanted to know what I, a Jew, was doing in the market at that hour. I pointed to my certificate, which he tore to bits at once without any hesitation. He told me, with evident enjoyment, that there was another guard at the exit, where I would be asked to show my papers again, and since I would not have any, I would be arrested, taken in and never again have to worry about being hungry. True enough, there was another guard, but it never occurred to his simple mind that all I had to do was take off my star after I had completed my purchases and walk out of the market — which I did. Unfortunately, I failed in my repeated attempts to get the passport for Andor.

Those times, the persecution, the wild reports and the effort of self-preservation taught me a lot. It taught me to be cautious and yet daring, to look behind my shoulder and yet anticipate what tomorrow might bring. It also taught me self-reliance and the bitterest lesson, somehow, that to be a Hungarian was no privilege.

The certificate the ruffian had destroyed was the one I had received for the job at the orphanage. I had another one for the rubble clearing job so I still retained my freedom of movement. It was incredible for those days, but not one day passed when I didn't roam the streets, in spite of the prohibition and the bombings. Perhaps because I was young, I was less afraid than the circumstances warranted. I think that one of the advantages of youth is that danger is only considered when it is already upon us; it is not, as a rule, anticipated.

I wrote to Andor to ask his opinion about whether I should convert to Christianity. I wondered whether it would help me, because there were strong rumours to that effect. He answered that the Church had not been known to help us in the past and he doubted that it could be relied upon to do so now, but he left the decision up to me.

I had hoped that he would make the decision for me. I felt that it might unlock the gates of hell that were imprisoning me and that I could stroll out at my leisure. In any case, I had never considered myself such a good Jew and doubted that baptism would convert me into a better Christian. It was whispered that convents and monasteries were sheltering many Jewish children. The conclusion I reached, from what I saw of the priests and read of their pronouncements in the newspapers, was that they helped the Fascists in a significant way in their solution of the 'Jewish Question', which, according to Hitler, lay in killing every last one. The priesthood had for many centuries looked askance at the Jews for their stiff-necked refusal to acknowledge Jesus as the son of G-d and filed it away as enemy action to be dealt with accordingly, when the opportunity should arise.

In spite of having seen many priests in the streets with Arrow-Cross arm-bands over their soutanes I went to the central church office, with many others, to inquire about becoming a Christian. I was told that the times were not suitable.

The war was not going well for the German-Hungarian alliance. The Russians had penetrated the Hungarian borders and were approaching the capital, but, incredibly, the authorities were more occupied with murdering Jews than winning the war.

On one occasion two Arrow-Cross boys of my age, or perhaps six months older, each with the official arm-band bearing the arrow-cross, the same as their fathers and elder brothers who were undoubtedly busy with more weighty matters, came into our building and ordered everybody down to the courtyard. They then went up to the third floor, into one of the apartments fronting the street, and started to shoot down into the street through one of the windows. Two of their mates answered with shots from the street and started to shout and raise the alarm that the Jews were shooting at Hungarians (we had been disowned as Hungarians). Such staged provocateur shootings were frequent occurrences — every time in a different district. One of the most shocking aspects, somehow, was the powerlessness of the regular police who stood by and witnessed the Arrow-Cross boys' "mischievous behaviour" and did nothing. As long as one wore the Arrow-Cross uniform, or even just the arm-band, one could shoot, loot or kill, even if the victim was not a Jew, and the police would just look on. The mob ruled, looting and killing could be witnessed in the city anywhere, any time.

The Germans put a freight train on the tram-tracks and drove it through the city. They went into the houses and brought down and loaded into the trains anything they considered worth while: machinery, dentists' equipment, tools, office equipment, paintings and other valuables. They didn't place too fine a point on whether it was Jewish property or not. The policemen watched.

In the middle of October the Regent, Miklós Horthy, made a radio broadcast. He stated that Hungary had lost the war and was laying down her arms, all further fighting by Hungarians was to stop.

If I had not tuned my ears so single-mindedly for news of my parents, sisters and brothers, but had paid some attention to explanations and commentaries freely bandied about by those who still bothered about politics, this announcement would not have come as such a complete surprise to me.

Ever since Horthy had come to power he had allied himself with Hitler in the fight against bolshevism, of which they were both terrified. Horthy had taken their measure when he put down the red, revolutionary government of Béla Kun in 1919 and became Regent. Save for the reservations he had about inhumane methods, Horthy was willing to go along with Hitler, even in his solution to the 'Jewish Question', especially up until the outbreak of the war. However he wanted to proceed much more slowly, so as to minimise the detrimental effect any sudden and large-scale elimination of Jews would undoubtedly have on the economy, already suffering due to the depression and adverse weather affecting several harvests.

Horthy could never be accused of being a friend of the Jews. When Hitler complained that he was lax in persecuting them, he pointed to the *Numerus Clausus*, a law enacted in 1920, whereby only a very limited and ever decreasing number of Jews were accepted to universities in Hungary. Horthy explained his feelings in a letter to his friend the Prime Minister, Teleki, how bitterly he resented Jewish successes in every field of Hungarian endeavour, that they had become enmeshed in the fabric of society in unfair competition with and to the detriment of Hungarians in such a way as to cause untold bother to extricate them. His hatred fitted him with magnifying glasses so that every little Jewish businessman became a giant of commerce in his eyes, which were painfully dazzled by the way the Jews outshone the Hungarians. Even when he travelled outside his country he had no respite and his soul cringed with hurt racial pride when world-famous compatriots were mentioned to him in well-meaning, polite admiration, because he knew them to be not Hungarians but Jews.

By 1943 he realised that it had been a grievous mistake to have allowed the Hungarian army to fall under German command and disposal. He made secret overtures of surrender and peace to the Allies and when he had favourable replies, he tried to concentrate the Hungarian forces within the borders. He justified this projected move to Hitler and his generals by pointing to the high Carpathian Mountains on the eastern borders as a logical and natural defence line to hold against the advancing Russians, instead of spilling scarce blood on the indefensible Ukrainian plains. Of course Hitler was not fooled. Whether or not he had wind of the 'traitorous' peace overtures, he went so far in his mistrust of Horthy that he ordered the invasion of Hungary, which took place on 19 March 1944. By October only the most fanatical could continue to believe in an Axis victory, but Szálasi was just such a fanatic. With the troops under German command and the country occupied, half by Russians, and half by Germans, Horthy's surrender broadcast was futile.

There was sporadic shooting for a few hours and the next broadcast stated that Ferenc Szálasi, the leader of the Arrow-Cross Party had seized power. It was made clear from the beginning that he was going to take a tougher line.

About noon the next day a truck stopped in front of our block and some fifteen Arrow-Cross men got out. They swarmed into our building and ordered everybody down to the courtyard within two minutes. Two of them went through the apartments and searched to make sure that nobody had managed to hide. There were about fifty of us. We were jostled out into the street where we were made to form lines and columns and were marched off to Tisza Kálmán Square. As we marched along the street our former neighbours lined the footpath. They spat upon the marchers and kicked and shoved whomever they could reach. A doctor walked alongside me, he must have been near seventy. He pointed out several of the jeerers as people who had been his patients for many years and whom he had delivered into the world. Perhaps the kicks and spit were by way of sincere gratitude, due to him for the sleepless nights and devoted care he had lavished on them through the years.

When we arrived at the Square we were made to assemble in front of the theatre and everyone's valuables were confiscated: money, jewellery, documents, even wedding rings. They then searched us individually. They found the odd box of matches or a fountain pen in the pockets of a few people who were taken into the theatre and beaten. They said the beatings were in punishment for the Jews' intention to burn down the theatre, with the equipment carefully secreted. The proceeds of the confiscations and searches were collected and removed on a stretcher taken from an ambulance. There were about a thousand of us by this time, having been joined by other, similar, groups and it amazed me to see the large pile of belongings — clothes, jewellery, cigarettes and food –even false teeth had been taken from people's mouths. I used to wonder what they did with it all.

By the time they finished the sun had set. There I was in my shirt sleeves in the middle of October. My teeth chattered from the cold. We were then marched off, once again in columns, to the Tatterzál (race track), about two kilometres on the other side of Eastern Station. This was the racing track where the trotting was held. We were pushed onto the open space in the middle and kept there for three days. As soon as it became dark a steady rain began, cold and miserable. The guards stood all around the perimeter pointing their rifles at us. Every now and then one would fire a shot to terrorise us. We were all shivering by the first morning, babies were crying and older children whinging from hunger and cold. Not one doubted that this would be our end.

On the third night the guards disappeared and we went home. We found our apartments had been looted by our pure-bred Aryan neighbours in our absence.

Russian planes were continually buzzing the city and wherever they saw a crowd they strafed or dropped a bomb or two. For months bomber planes from the west had been arriving with clockwork regularity at ten in the morning and at ten at night to bomb the city. The bombing usually lasted an hour or so. We lived near the Eastern Station and we thought every bomb aimed at it would fall on our house. Since I had for some months been walking around with death holding my hand, the fearful sound of the bombing was as the sweetest music in my ears. I considered the bombs as some measure of revenge for our wrongs, even though we ourselves could have become the victims. We felt the bombing would bring an earlier end to the war and, therefore, to the persecutions.

Szálasi's rule removed the remnants of law and order that could be said to have lingered and there was increased shooting and killing without let or hindrance on the streets. I myself saw an elderly colonel shot in front of the Royal Hotel on the Boulevard. A sixteen-year-old Arrow-Cross Party member claimed that the colonel had failed to return his salute. I have no doubt that there were many Hungarians who were innocent of such crimes, who minded their own business, sat in their homes and harmed no one. The trouble was they were invisible. The ones I could see seemed to me ferocious and vicious.

A few days after our return from the Tatterzál we were all evicted. Arrow-Cross men came into the building once more, but this time we were told to pack as much of our possessions as we could carry. We were given half an hour to get ready and then grouped into lots of thirty and marched off. We were not told where we were going, only that the apartments were needed for the refugees. In all the times that we had been force-marched, we never saw a policeman, nor did we see one now. Police, the law and the meaning of law ceased to exist for us. I wondered whether an accident victim would have been able to get hold of a policeman. We never did find out whether the police would not, could not or dared not interfere — perhaps they had no power in those days of mob-rule.

After a walk of about three kilometres we were led into No. 40 Sziget Street on the banks of the Danube. This was also a 'yellow star house' and already quite full, with people camped on the staircases and in the corridors. There were children under sixteen and old people of over sixty-five. The rest of the people had been taken to Király and Dob streets, Klauzál Square etc. This area had been designated as a ghetto and its original non-Jewish residents had been transferred to other apartments elsewhere and the Jews crammed in instead. We had no prior knowledge of where we would be taken or why or when.

Our group of thirty was taken to an empty coal cellar and left there. There was neither guard nor leader, no one in authority; nor was there a kitchen, toilet, beds, food or water. It gets dark fairly early in November. By the time we arrived at our destination it was already dark. As we had started off we were warned that if anyone from the group of thirty was missing, the whole group would be shot, so all the way we guarded one another to make sure no one escaped. All thirty of us arrived, settled on our luggage and sat in the dark cellar, covered in coal dust, all night.

A narrow spiral staircase led to the coal cellar. One had to walk very carefully because the steps were so narrow that they could barely accommodate even a tiny foot, and the coal dust spilt over the years made them slippery.

Most of the blocks of flats had coal and wood cellars for the tenants' use; the cellars were divided into cells. In ours there must have been twenty apartments because there were twenty cells. Fuel had been scarce the previous winter and the cells were empty. Living in the cellar had certain advantages. Although autumn was well advanced, down in the cellar it was not cold, in fact it was quite cozy. Whenever the air-raid alarm sounded we didn't have to rush to the bomb-shelters we were already there. It was compulsory for us to go down to the cellars because the authorities feared that the empty flats would provide opportunities for theft and for signalling to the enemy.

In the morning, as soon as it was light, a broom was found and we set to cleaning. We also found a toilet on the back stairs and a tap in the courtyard. I removed the yellow star from my chest and went out to shop. I managed to find some food, a cooking pot and a spirit burner. By the time I returned some old ladies had cleaned up and made the place habitable. We hoped things would get no worse!

Much more emphasis was still being placed on dealing with the Jews, rather than on fighting the war. The Russians were already in the outer suburbs on the Buda side. Soldiers were able to travel to the front on trams. The Germans seemed completely occupied with looting and long freight trains could be seen on the tram-tracks on the Boulevard, loaded with valuables stolen by them. The Arrow-Cross Party members were busy harassing and killing Jews. Only the unfortunate soldiers of the Hungarian army were still desperately encouraging tired, half-dead, aged horses to pull the cannons another yard or so over the slippery paving stones, where the poor beasts continually fell in their harness. The mob followed on the heels of the Germans and took possession of whatever was left. Otherwise, everyone was engaged in finding food.

I, too, went shopping every day and managed to gather most of what our little group needed. Soon after Szálasi came to power the Community Office advised me to stop working on the rubble clearing because there was no German guard, as there had been on the orphanage job, so our lives were in the hands of any stray Arrow-Cross man. I could still receive financial assistance if I needed it. I had received some money from them, but lately I had been sharing it with my new 'family'. I had become separated from my distant relatives, with whom I had been living in the apartment. I joined with two of the old ladies who kept the place clean. They gave me money for shopping every day but didn't specify what I should buy; they trusted me to get whatever I could.

They had been thrown together a few weeks before I came along. Aunt Olga was a grandmother, although she was the younger of the two. Her husband had died the year before and her daughter and two grandchildren had been taken from their home in Szolnok, a large country town, and she had no idea where they were. She was a capable person who could take in a situation quickly and decide what was needed to be done. She would then set to and do it, without hesitation. Her son-in-law was in the forced labour – he had written last from Transylvania, more than eighteen months before.

The other old lady, Aunt Ági, had never been married. She was about sixty years old and a Christian. One Jewish grandfather on her mother's side had been discovered. She had never known about this shameful blot on her Aryan family's escutcheon until the headmistress of the Protestant girls' school, where she had taught history for over twenty years, reluctantly told her during an official interview, when she had been dismissed. Had they not had the special relationship of shared devotion to the good of the school for many years she would never have found out why she had been sacked, just a few months before retirement, nor that one of her younger colleagues, out of professional jealousy, had gone to the trouble of digging into her ancestry in the hope of finding a Jew. Once the charge had been made, and vigorously pressed, the headmistress had had no choice. It must have been an extreme case due to her position, for inquiries were not usually pursued beyond parents.

She had taught Hungarian history. Her guiding light was the process of civilisation through the ages, so well illustrated by Hungary as it had gone from strength to strength through the thousand years of its existence, right up to the Trianon Peace Treaty and its shameful aftermath, with which, fortunately, she had not had to deal in class, it having been too recent. She had dedicated her total energy to educating, informing, elevating the minds of her pupils with a knowledge of the past, the best tool, according to her, for appreciating the present and founding a proper future in which Hungary would again take its rightful place among the nations. It would resume the role it had played through the ages, when it had been the standard bearer of culture and would hold back the barbarian hordes of the east. This was according to the best irredentist-chauvinist thinking of the time and was what I had been taught right through school. That the world had turned upside down and her ideals had fallen and been broken to bits and that civilisation had regressed, back to the Dark Ages, she had no doubt. She felt lost. She went about her tasks of cleaning with a tempo that daunted and amazed me. She was always doing or looking for something to do, to fog up the image of the country gone mad, beside which her having been designated a Jewess paled into insignificance. She kept the place neat and clean as if the problems of the world were right there in the coal cellar and she could scrub them out of existence together with the coal dust.

Even in those horrid times there was food available in the capital's shops. What is more, even the restaurants were open and I often went in to eat something, for I seemed to be forever hungry. I was not much afraid, although there was reason, because of the bombs and strafing and the indiscriminate shooting by the Arrow-Cross people. My baker friend was at the other end of the city but I went to collect the bread and fine, white bread rolls he had put by for me every day. Meat was very scarce but dried beans, peas and lentils as well as some fruit were available, also some smallgoods.

Down in the cellar I fulfilled an important role, that of bringing home the food. My ladies were content with my efforts and management and that in turn gave me the impetus to do as well as I could.

Every time I returned, they clamoured for news of the outside, what had I seen? what had I heard? I saw 'yellow star houses' emptied and the people marched off in columns. Where? I didn't know. I heard that the capital was surrounded by Russian troops and that it would be only a matter of days before they would occupy Budapest. At night the sound of cannon fire was clearly audible even down in the cellar. Planes would fly over frequently, drop a bomb or two, or strafe a crowd if there was one large enough to make it worth their while. I saw soldiers loaded with all their equipment, sometimes in trucks but more often in horse-drawn carts, on their way to the front. The "heroic German-Hungarian Army", as it was always referred to in the news reports, was not so heroic looking as they dragged their cannons or carts with an emaciated horse between the shafts, perhaps a tiny bale of hay tied to the back, representing the sum total of their supplies. I doubt that the demoralised soldier would have been capable of firing a shot when he arrived at the front with his fingers frozen, on the strength gained from a bowl of thin soup. Only the Arrow-Cross were well fed and supplied with the best weapons, but they were using them on the Jews.

Our life in the cellar lasted until 4 December 1944, when the Arrow-Cross men again entered the building at three o'clock in the afternoon. They gave us half an hour to get ready to be moved to yet another place. One of my old ladies, Aunt Olga, who was in the middle of cooking a pot of paprika potatoes, left it on the spirit burner. To this day I have the taste of it on my tongue, though I never got near it, and for the next few months it was the tantalising subject of my hungry dreams, awake and asleep.

We were grouped into lots of fifty and taken to the bank of the Danube to a park. There we were re-sorted. This time we were not asked how old we were. After one look we were divided into two groups. When the sorting was finished we had to walk along the same road as before, and once again watch one another. Should anyone have been missing from the group, the whole lot of us would have been shot. Not for an instant did we doubt that they would have carried out their threat without hesitation or compunction. Countless hundreds were shot on the banks of the Danube every night and their bodies consigned to the water, where they could be seen floating.

Perhaps an hour's walk took us to No. 10 Teleki Square. The building was empty when we arrived, but it was obvious that it had only recently been vacated. Each one found a corner and settled with his belongings as best he could. I was becoming quite experienced at it. More people kept arriving all through the night. None of us had any idea why we had been brought to this place. By morning our numbers had risen to about a thousand and there was hardly standing room in the building.

At ten in the morning a truck pulled up outside full of Arrow-Cross men who alighted and ranged themselves, about a metre apart, around the building, which happened to be a corner block. When we saw their rifles pointing at us we were convinced that we were all going to be shot. A few Arrow-Cross men came into the building and made everyone go outside and form into groups of eighty. They then marched us off towards the outskirts of the city to the Józsefvárosi Station, at most five hundred metres from Teleki Square. We were bundled into cattle trucks where the enormous door clanged shut behind us. I was among the first group, so I found myself locked in from as early as eleven o'clock in the morning. Ten people from the next group were put in with us, so there were ninety in the truck. I was glad then that my old ladies had been sent with the other group (rumour had it that they were taken to the ghetto). I wished I was still with them. I never heard of them again.

It took two days to put everyone into wagons, of which there were about twenty-five, full of human beings. To me this was the most degrading part of the whole war. Ninety of us were squashed into a cattle wagon intended to accommodate eight horses and ten men. This information was affixed to the outside by the door! There was a small opening, high up, like a window, without glass, covered by an iron grille.

The doors slid on tracks, opening from the centre. They were eventually opened about a centimetre. This was where we had to go to pass water or to defecate. We tried, as much as possible, to hose off the faeces with the stream of urine, so that the sewage could flow through the tiny opening. Men and women were together in the same wagon, and children too, thirteen years old and upwards. The oldest person I judged to be about sixty-five.

There was a group of twelve deaf youths among us. They could not communicate with one another in the dark because they couldn't see to read the sign language they were using. During the day it was just light enough for them to discern each other's signs with difficulty, but by about four in the afternoon it became too dark. When somebody inadvertently stepped on a hand or foot of any of them an inarticulate scream penetrated the fetid air. It was not until much later that we realised they were handicapped.

Next day people were still being piled into the wagons. An Arrow-Cross man came and asked for two men to sweep out the guard's wagon. I was one of the 'volunteers' and the other was not much older than me. Once outside the wagon the other boy started up a conversation with the Arrow-Cross man and I was sent off to a little shack about twenty metres to the right to fetch a broom. I walked off and when I thought I was a sufficient distance away, I looked around and it seemed that no one was paying any attention to me so I started to run out towards a tram that was approaching. During the past months I must have jumped on to and off moving trams at least a hundred times! But the Arrow-Cross man noticed me running and shouted, "Stop, or I'll shoot." Coward that I was, I stopped and returned.

They beat me and threw me back into the wagon. I am sure I could have jumped on to that tram and they would never have caught me. I now think I stopped because I had nowhere to go.

I moaned and groaned and felt sorry for myself, back there in the wagon, because they had beaten me with their rifle butts, in my stomach, my shoulders and on my back. I realised that this had been my last opportunity and I had failed. The actual pain didn't last long but I cursed myself for a stupid coward and told myself that I deserved what I had coming to me.

Life in the wagon was the worst I had yet experienced under the Fascists. The stench was both unbearable and inescapable. The loss of dignity as an individual, the loss of privacy, the feelings of shame we had to endure were devastating. We had to sit with our knees drawn up to our faces, leaning up against one another with very little room to move or change position. There was nowhere for our hands — I would put mine in my lap but it would not be long before they slid down beside me on to the floor where someone would either sit, step or kneel on them.

Whatever people had brought with them in rucksacks or otherwise only served to increase our discomfort because there simply wasn't room to put anything. Those along the wall managed to wedge slivers of wood they had found into the crevices between planks in the wall of the wagon and hung their bags on them. Periodically, the extemporised pegs gave way, dropping their loads on to the heads or other parts of those below. I had few belongings and they were in a makeshift rucksack which I used to lean against, but people stumbled into it, as well as into all the other bundles, sometimes indistinguishable from the human ones huddled in misery on the floor.

At night, when we were asleep, our bodies would relax out of control and we would wake to find our limbs stretched in abandoned confusion, one on top of another, constricted and numb. I would find that I had my hand on someone's side and somebody else's leg on my chest. We had no access to water — we were given nothing at all.

On the morning of 6 December I woke to find that the wagon was moving. By the time it was light we had stopped at some station, perhaps it was a siding, it was impossible to see where. After a few hours' halt we started off again. We stopped, after a long haul, at what seemed to be a large town. Somebody was able to make out the name of the station: Komárom. Thus we learnt that we were travelling westward, towards Austria.

It seemed we had reached the bottom of the pit helpless and abandoned. Each one sat on the floor of the wagon wrapped in disbelief and unable to accept reality. Even the usual bickering had disappeared, the usual jockeying for minute advantages, the dirty looks that said "you have taken my space", which we had come to expect in the overcrowded conditions. Not only could we not help one another, we had also lost the power to hurt.

The wagon doors were opened in the morning and we were allowed out to the toilet. The news of the wagons' arrival must have spread quickly through Komárom for a horde of opportunists greeted us, their baskets loaded with loaves of bread and containers of water, which they offered to us for money or clothes. Not many were able to buy anything because they held out for high prices. I sold my only remaining blanket for a glass of water and a scrap of bread.

There was a boy with us who had been born and had grown up in Komárom. When he saw that all eyes were on the trading he climbed under the wagon to the other side, intending to make off, never thinking that there might be guards around. Without any warning he was shot. The bullet hit him in the upper arm. The poor fellow suffered excruciating pain for the rest of the journey. Somebody found a plank and one of the doctors among us strapped his arm to it as best he could, but the boy never stopped begging to be put out of his misery, whimpering that he couldn't bear it. The guards would do nothing for him, saying "it's a good lesson". With the straight plank tied to his arm he could neither move nor bend it. There was no room for a stretched-out arm in the wagon, someone was continually being knocked or pushed against it as the wagon moved and he screamed with agony. In the end it was decided to tie him to the wagon wall with only his legs resting on the floor, but even then he couldn't help letting out a groan every time the train jolted.

We stopped more than we travelled. At Ács we were halted for nearly three days. Rumour had it that the station-master had refused to allow an engine to be coupled to the train. Apparently he was hoping to delay our train long enough for the fast approaching Russians to overtake us. It was also said that he refused to give up one of his few remaining engines for such a purpose, because they were needed to send supplies to the front. In the end one of the guards became aware of the delaying tactics and used his influence as a member of the Arrow-Cross Party and we were off again. Under ordinary circumstances the journey would have taken about six hours. We travelled for eight days to the border at Hegyeshalom. New guards awaited us there and we were officially handed over to the German authorities. Our Hungarian guards disappeared and the German ones took over responsibility for the more than two thousand Jews.

3. BERGEN BELSEN

The scenery didn't change at all, the softly contoured meadows that had surrounded us on the Hungarian side of the border continued to roll by — only the guards were changed. No longer did we have the sloppy, young Hungarian hooligans, who made what seemed to us momentous decisions on the spur of the moment and according to their whim. The Germans were soldiers, they were specialists, mature, educated men, experienced in their job and knew exactly what to do, as if they had a university degree in wholesale murder. They had been given a scientifically worked out plan, laid out with military precision. These were Germans, by nature inclined to a love of precision, who had received their orders from a higher authority and, of course, were not to question those orders, were not responsible for anything except the proper carrying out of those orders.

They surrounded the wagons, positioning themselves in a line about ten metres away and about three metres from each other. The doors were opened for the captives to get out. As we descended from the wagons the command was passed from mouth to mouth down the line of guards: "*Scheissen*!" There, on the spot, we lowered our trousers and attempted to obey. Some, for whom it must have been a welcome relief, were successful, the others — bad luck. The next command was similarly transmitted: "Ansteigen!" Back into the wagons. I had thought we had reached the depths in humiliation but I realised that there were further stages, one of which was to defecate on command. Not many had been able to obey, for we had not eaten for days.

The wagon doors were left open and in front of every door a guard stood and we waited. Soon, an enormous cauldron of soup arrived, carried by two soldiers. Everyone received a ladleful. I had to wait until someone with a bowl had finished, because I didn't have any container. The soup had been made with bread mashed in water. I had never eaten anything like it before but it was warm and tasted good after eight days of fasting. Another two soldiers brought a load of loaves of black bread and we each got a sizeable hunk with a piece of cheese. Many agreed that the Germans had been prepared for our arrival and had made some arrangements, unlike our compatriots who had neglected the most basic tasks. We could not help but hope that the future would be better. We were to find out in due course.

We had taken the opportunity, when we were out of the wagon, to wash our hands in the patches of snow, we had received warm soup and a piece of bread and cheese; our spirits rose. The doors were locked (but again not completely, there was a tiny gap) and we were on our way.

I sat down once again in my spot and started to eat the cheese and bread. Everyone around me did the same. By the time we finished eating it was quite dark so we settled down to sleep. The train seemed to be going faster on the German side of the border and the clatter quickly lulled us.

It was completely dark when I awoke after a short sleep and my mouth and throat were parched and burning from thirst but of course we had no water. The bread and cheese lay in my stomach like a stone.

If one moved, all moved. If one stood, all had to stand. Movement went through the wagon in waves because of the lack of space. When my neighbour got up I also started the necessary accommodating movements but felt someone lying on my legs. I thought the man must indeed have been tired to have been able to sleep amid all the commotion and asked my neighbour to have a look at him. I felt him bending down. He must have touched him because I heard him say: "He is dead". He straightened up and helped me to move the body off my legs. By this time the reality of it had sunk in and my whole body started to shake uncontrollably, as if I were cold. I had never before been in contact with a dead body and this one had been lying on top of me. I had been lying next to it all the time I had been asleep.

The doors were closed when we reached the Hungarian-Austrian border and were not opened again for six days. It was worse than being in hell. I cannot describe a hundredth part of what it was like. It is said that one must eat to survive — if you don't eat, you will die. That is not so. But drink, that is another matter.

The terrible, the maddening, thirst. I don't believe the punctilious Germans knew to what tortures they condemned us for those six days. They probably never even thought about it. The deaf youths continually lit matches in an attempt to see enough to communicate with each other, their inarticulate voices issued from their parched throats to add to the suffering. The boy who had been shot was still tied to the wagon wall and still groaned in his unending pain. And now a corpse. At least he was past feeling pain, thirst and fear, numbed muscles sitting on the hard floor in the dark, the stench of locked-up creatures, who, nevertheless, had to defecate. But the thirst was undoubtedly the worst.

It was the middle of December, cold and snowing, but we didn't mind the cold at all. The fields were covered with snow and we tried to catch the falling flakes through the bars to slake our thirst.

I heard an old man muttering quietly to himself as he sat beside me. All of us felt as low, as desperate, as helpless and hopeless as one can get since we had crossed the border. I asked him what he was mumbling about. As for me, I was too busy wondering what was to become of us, how long it would take to be free of our misery.

He told me that he had been the director of a publishing house and often had occasion to travel to foreign lands, that he had been to England many times, America, France and Germany, but mostly to Germany because the Hungarian publishing industry had many connections with foreign publishers. The Hungarian reading public was not very large and the profit lay in translations, mostly into German. His house had dealt largely with children's books. He used to hold the Germans in high esteem, found them correct in every last detail in business. They always knew exactly what they wanted and how much it should cost. They were positive and determined. (The impression I had gained from what I had seen of them in Budapest was that they were like puppets or like figures on a chess-board — they stayed wherever they were placed, the only difference being the helmet, rifle and uniform.) The old man went on to say that he had always been struck by their peculiar sense of humour, so different from any other race. He explained that humour in general, particularly Jewish humour, picked on a weakness in a person's character, like stupidity for the subject of a joke. The Germans liked to laugh at people's misfortunes for example, someone slipping on a banana skin was hilarious — as if they couldn't admit of any weakness in their character. Other nations laugh with the clown but the Germans laugh at the clown.

He described how he had frequently travelled this route in the past in first-class luxury, with stewards running to turn down his comfortable bed and fetching drinks and cigars. Now we were packed into our hell and he was analysing the German sense of humour. He died a few days after we arrived in camp.

The train roared along for five or six hours and then it stopped to take on water and coal. Most of the time we couldn't make out where we were, whether or not we were at a station, or what the station's name might be. I couldn't have read the name even if I had seen it written, for my glasses broke the first night in the wagon. I saw everything as a blur. Under the circumstances, perhaps, this was not a disadvantage, had I lost all my other senses and been unable to feel altogether, I would have been better off.

That journey numbed more than just our muscles. Sitting there on the floor of the wagon day and night without a prospect of an end broke our spirit, our will to fight. We didn't even notice that all talk of escape, of plans to escape or of opposition to our guards — indeed, planning of any sort was absent among us. We just complied with the commands issued.

We saw no Austrians, neither soldiers nor civilians, in spite of being in their country. Perhaps they were unwilling to have anything to do with the entire affair, if so, it is much to their credit.

While we were travelling over Hungarian soil, hope of escape had sprung instantly to mind as soon as the train stopped for any reason. The names of the stations had been familiar, and we could understand whatever little we could hear through the walls of the wagon. This somehow had the effect of raising our hopes that maybe some of us, perhaps even myself, would find an opportunity to escape. As soon as we crossed the border all hope was gone. Even those who were fluent in German knew that all they had to do was utter one word to be recognised as a foreigner – a Hungarian at that! This hopelessness had a worse, a more lasting effect than hunger, thirst and those terrible, cramped conditions. I, who had always felt a step ahead of my compatriots during the previous eight months, sat on my little bundle of belongings and gazed, staring into the vacuum inside and outside myself, empty of that certain vitality that must accompany the living from the day we are born and for as long as life persists. Those commands, issued by the guards in a language I didn't understand, in a tone denoting contempt, might as well have included: “Become an automaton!”, along with “Out!, In!, Shit!, Take!”, for that is what I had become, as had all the others.

At no time, not when we were first taken prisoner, not when we were put into the wagons, nor when we were transferred to the Germans did anybody ask us for identity papers (not even for the Swiss pass) nor our names. Neither did we, amongst ourselves, inquire about each other’s name or origin, rather, people seemed to acquire various appellations, such as: Longhair, or Lame, or Ganderneck. I was referred to as “the Army-Cap Boy” right through, both in the wagon and subsequently in the camp. Neither those in authority nor any one of my companions in suffering ever asked my name, right up to the liberation.

The people in the various wagons had no contact with one another; nevertheless, I was conscious of the fact that we were all suffering the same conditions. I was becoming overpowered by thirst. The corpse lying next to me made me so afraid that my teeth chattered, although, had I given it any thought, he was the only one whom I need not have feared. He was harmless, and what is more, he could no longer be harmed, but his presence made me fear that we would all suffocate in that airless, waterless, G-dless black hole.

After six more days and nights of rattling, the wagons stopped on a siding in open fields. We heard the soldiers running about outside. They opened the doors and shouted: *“Aussteigen!”* It crossed my mind that we might get another ration of bread and cheese and that this time I would manage better, but this did not happen. We tumbled out of the wagons and rushed on to the snow, grabbing up handfuls and stuffing it into our mouths as fast as we were able. If I had been shot at that moment I wouldn’t have minded, I doubt if I would have noticed. That I had lived to feel, to taste this wetness! We continued to eat the snow for a long time and, miraculously, the guards didn't object. They could not have had any idea of the torment we had endured. If they had, perhaps they would have included it on purpose in the future. I shied away from the thought of how it must have been for my family, for all the Jews from the provinces, who had been taken in summer.

When commanded, we lined up into rows, each one with his belongings, and started off. The boy whose arm had been shot was placed on a blanket and dragged on the snow by two men. He was unable to walk. After ten days tied to the wagon wall his legs could not hold him. The guards took no notice of his plight. The two men dragging him were changed periodically. He continued to groan softly, without a word. Perhaps he was relieved he had not been left behind.

My belongings were in a sack tied with string on the two bottom corners and fastened at the top, so I could carry it on my shoulders. I had a couple of worn shirts, two pairs of holey socks and a lightweight coat several sizes too big for me. I was in danger of tripping myself when I wore it. I didn't have much to carry. Many others had several bundles, which they did their best to lug along. I often took my turn to drag the boy on the blanket but, like the others, could only last a short distance. In the meantime I watched to see if anybody left anything behind that might be useful to me. I had neither jumper, boots, nor blanket and was terribly cold. When people could no longer drag their bundles, they simply abandoned them. I picked up a briefcase that must have been left behind by somebody. I didn't look inside it until much later.

I tried to guess where we might be. No one had any idea, especially since the fields were covered with snow; only the pines stretched out their long necks.

It took us about three hours to walk what I estimated to be about three kilometres. We arrived at a large, wire-grid gate in a fence of the same material, two and a half metres or so high, surrounding what appeared to be an enormous area broken into smaller spaces by more fences. We were stopped in front of the gate, where all the belongings, carried with so much effort, had to be deposited. The gate then opened and we filed in. A soldier stood on each side busily counting us. I saw writing on an arch over the gate but could not read it. I heard someone saying "Bergen-Belsen."

Near the gate there was a separate enclosure with a large group of people, who, much to my surprise, spoke to us in Hungarian. They asked us where we had come from and in answer to our query, told us they were from Bor, where they had served in the forced labour units. They had left in front of the Russian advance and it had taken them a very long time to get there — just a few days before. A similar enclosure with many barrack buildings, was opened for us. The barracks were built of long pieces of timber painted green. There were some people already there, men, women, and children too, in fact entire families who also had arrived not long before. They, too, were from Hungary and had been taken to an Austrian farm as early as May and had worked there until winter, when they were brought here. We were in another area from the people with whom we had spoken when we first entered so we couldn't talk with them any more. With the people in the further compound we could have communicated, only a wire fence and language separated us, for they were Polish and Dutch. Only those who spoke Yiddish could converse with them, and in those days I could not.

We were allocated to various barracks and given a bunk. These were in three tiers, I got a middle one. My first and immediate need was for water. I was directed to the washroom in the first building and found most of my companions there doing their best to make up for the six days of thirst. Our belongings were returned to us, thrown down off a large cart which had been dragged in by captives. We each fished out our own. We couldn't understand why they should have first taken them from us and then returned them — some conjectured that they were searched for weapons, or for valuables. I left my bits of underwear in the sack and placed it under my head for a pillow and used my coat for a blanket. For the first time in two weeks I lay stretched out, albeit in a hard bunk. It put me in mind of a baby when it is born and can stretch its limbs for the first time. There, in the wagon, we had become so used to doing without proper sleep that I had quite forgotten what it felt like. I went out like a candle in the wind.

Next morning when I awoke I went to have a wash. I did the best I could, having neither soap nor towel. In the end I used my shirt to dry myself. About nine o'clock an enormous cauldron of black coffee was brought by some prisoners and distributed into each person's dish. I had no dish and by the time I had managed to borrow one, there was no coffee left.

Soon, I came to know some 'officials', who wore armbands on which their rank was written, such as 'camp commander', or 'compound commander', and each had a deputy. We had a 'barracks commander' and several doctors, some of whom — as we later discovered — were not really doctors at all. There were men 'appointed' to carry the food — I never found out by what process — who all received special rations. Allocations of food to each barracks were already minimal but by the time they were distributed a third had disappeared. All the evil was not confined to the other side, either.

Every morning the entire population of the camp had to muster, line up, and be counted. The order would come down from the guards and was transmitted from compound to compound, by the 'officials', who simply shouted at the top of their voices. Then came the call for the food carriers, given in the same way, who would go to the gate to fetch the cauldrons. The line-up meant that we had to stand two to four hours in the wintry cold, in snow and puddles. More often than not they didn't bother to count us and hardly even glanced our way, then, after what seemed to them the required period, we were dismissed and sent back to the barracks. Often we were called out in the evening or even at night, without any obvious reason. When in fact we were counted, it took no longer than ten minutes but this occurred only about three times in the four months I spent there. Nevertheless, there we stood, daily, for hours on end, sometimes as long as eight.

One of the guards allocated to our compound was quite old and very thin, without a tooth in his head, who looked for all the world like Popeye the sailor man of cartoon fame. He never spoke to anybody but I once saw him pull a piece of bread from his pocket and give it to a little boy.

Another used to come in dressed to the nines in his uniform, his buttons and boots gleamed and glittering, unlike 'Popeye', whose uniform looked as if it had been thrown on him with a shovel. This one used to walk through the camp with a proud and stiff carriage, a fixed, contemptuous little smile on his otherwise expressionless face. One could tell that his whole being was devoted to the true and wholehearted service of the System.

Yet another could not, in truth, be referred to as a person except from a distance, nor will I insult the animal kingdom by placing him among them. As soon as the call was sounded for the muster he used to rush into the nearest barrack, grab a plank from a handy bunk and belabour whomever he could reach with it, wherever he could hit them, with all his strength, as they were trying to get out. This thing, this enormous hitting machine, was, to me, one of the symbols of the Third Reich. It is impossible to describe his expression or bearing, it was painful to see; he didn't walk, he sidled, and when he hit, it was not only with the strength of his arms but he swung with his whole body behind it. He never uttered a sound. People would crowd the doorway and in their attempt to get away from him would push each other over, blocking the exit and force others to step on the fallen. He just continued to swing as if he were chopping wood. We named him the 'Plank Beast'.

A week after our arrival it was Christmas. As a special privilege, we all received an extra piece of bread, some jam and a piece of salami, which, it was explained, was due to us because we were holders of 'passports' issued by neutral States. These privileges we 'enjoyed' then for the first and last time and I nearly fell a victim to them. I ate up the whole lot then and there, and got a nasty bout of diarrhoea.

I awoke during the night with excruciating gripes. I thought if I could pass wind it would ease me but lost some liquid faeces as well. I quickly jumped off my bunk and started to feel around for my shoes in the dark. In my extreme need for haste I only had time to find one shoe. As I hobbled and ran to the latrine through the snow I found I had delayed too long. By the time I got there, a distance of about five hundred metres, I could return, my purpose accomplished, although not as I intended. The barracks were still dark so I tried to feel for, and do away with, the tell-tale signs with my shod foot, but, unfortunately, hit the mark with the other, bare one. I did the best I could but the light of day revealed the frozen muck on the barracks floor. Luckily, it was not obvious which bunk it had come from. In our camp diarrhoea meant certain death because the victim had to move out of the barracks into another one designated as the hospital, although there was neither treatment nor medication there. It was well known as a one-way street.

Whenever sickness of any kind was discovered, it fell to the barracks commander to escort the patient out of the barracks immediately, because of the fear of contagion in those crowded conditions. Illness in camp was not one of the options, of which there were only two: one carried on living as best one could, or one died. Tending the sick was not part of the Germans' plan, and even if it had been, they could not have managed it any better than they did with the food supply, because of the overabundance of captives. There was no medicine. The sick were led to the 'hospital', where they lay down in one of the three bunks, and were usually dead by morning.

Therefore, I kept my diarrhoea a secret, only asking one of the doctors in our compound, as if I were merely curious, what treatment he would recommend under the circumstances. He said one should not drink the soup we were given, nor water, only coffee, and to restrict oneself to the bread for solid food and, turning to me for the first time, said, "A young person might pull through". I recovered without being found out. I traded my next ten days' soup portion for a blanket. My coat, which I had used for a cover, was not warm enough and in my condition I suffered terribly from the cold.

The Merchant from Szeged bought my soup portions. I had noticed him when he relieved an old man of the other corner of the blanket on which we were dragging the boy whose arm had been shot. He had grabbed hold of the blanket with energy and asked me, without a glance or preamble, "What's a fellow-me-lad like you doing in this place?"

He had not been in my wagon, his face and voice were unfamiliar, but I recognised his speech at once, it was strongly marked with the special and easily discernible accent of Szeged and its environs, in the south. Having castigated myself with the same question ever since I had missed the tram, I replied, "A good question, the same as you, I guess."

At once he began to tell me his history. He said that for the last fourteen days he had been asking himself how he could have fallen into this situation.

"I was the busiest grain and produce merchant around, ran a truck, drove my own car and had a telephone in the house as well as in my office," he boasted. "I married the most beautiful girl, had two gorgeous children, a son and a darling baby girl, and now I am lugging this poor boy, who is barely breathing. I deserve it, I deserve it all. I was greedy. The world was mine and I wanted more."

We had many conversations. He spoke freely to me and I had the feeling that it was almost instead of talking to himself, because I was young and listened eagerly.

"My father had been a merchant and I also became one," he said one day when we were standing around shivering, waiting interminably to be counted.

"You may not believe it but I could talk handcuffs open with my sales pitch. When I had finished my schooling my father told me that he considered me a smart, capable fellow, that there was no reason for one such as I to remain in Hungary, where, according to him, Jews would always be blamed with something or other, no matter what — if we do well, that's wrong and if we are unsuccessful, that's no good either. I was to go to Palestine and start afresh there, my parents would follow as soon as I had found my feet; he expected that to happen soon after I arrived there. He said that once a man starts in business he can't move because business is like that. When it goes well it's a crime and a shame to give it up and when it goes badly it is impossible. How right he had been!

"In 1939 my father died and six months later, my mother. They were lucky. From way back he had been a Zionist and brought me up like that, too. We used to go to meetings and collect money to send people to Palestine and had the emissaries from there staying in our house. "Before he died he told me to sell up and go, conditions were worsening every day and in Palestine a fellow like me, who falls on his feet, could be useful. If he could see me now! Gizi, my wife, you could follow her progress down the street by the way heads turned to look at her, she was that beautiful, she urged me too. She said to have a plan for our life, the way we had, a dream to fulfil, was better than the biggest treasure, and even more, because we had the chance to realise it; that so many people lived their weeks and months until the years were spawned and multiplied, unnoticed, just spent, but we could make them count for something. But I always found reasons. First my mother would be left alone, then Gizi was pregnant and how can a woman be expected to traipse around strange fields and sneak across borders at night in that condition, even though she begged. Later the baby was too little or I had a big deal to put through – I always seemed to have those and then Gizi was pregnant again. Then it was all finished, I had to report for forced labour and the shutters had come down on the borders and clicked locked. Even then, with bribes and courage something could still have been managed, but I found reasons for postponement instead and the dream was not even a dream any more.

"Sure, I thought I was smart. I wasn't going to go to Palestine to wield a pick and shovel to build, like the emissaries said you had to, I was going to have the money to have it done for me. As a forced labourer I was shunted hither and yon. With determination, I still could have stepped off, I am sure of it, the way you step off a footpath on to a different track, but I kept thinking that the next day would bring a better chance. The last chapter you already know. My wife and children were deported from Szeged in June. I haven't heard of them since. Then, suddenly, I had courage. Like a rabid dog I ran away and kept running and hiding. I was caught and escaped several times until I was netted in the street in Pest on the fifth of December and before I knew what's what I found myself in the wagon."

The impression he gave me while he talked was that he felt it was all right for him to tell me whatever came to his lips because I was a youngster and of not much account, but that he couldn't have spoken like that to any other person. Yet he had to speak, the guilt he was tormented by would have burst him, if he had not spoken. He looked ten years older than he was, with his lined forehead and three-weeks' growth of beard. He talked about his regrets, his love for his wife and children, and his unrealised dreams in a way that was very revealing to me. I couldn't mention my family and my feelings for them without bursting into tears so I never spoke of them. I thought about his silver candlesticks and his tableware, his Persian carpets and telephones, left for the neighbours' booty, and his Gizi with the little children tossed into a wagon in the heat of June to be swallowed up by the maws of Germany and I found myself unable to speak.

At the time of our 'special privileges', I had been surprised at the announcement about our special status, for not only were there many in the camp who had never had any kind of passports, but no one had ever asked to see mine. Of late, even I hadn't seen it. After the war I heard that the Germans did indeed have an agreement with various neutral countries, including the Vatican, to place a certain number of Jews under their protection, whom they were going to exchange for German nationals held in several countries and, later, for medicines and other war necessities and that some hundreds of people were sent to Switzerland from Bergen-Belsen. While I was there I saw and heard, indeed, knew, nothing of it.

At the camp there was a properly conducted market with reasonably stable prices. A portion of soup or a cigarette were each worth a centimetre of bread. I paid in soup for my blanket but I could also have got it for bread. Every item had its price in bread or cigarettes, these were the basic staple goods. I had been fortunate enough to find a bowl with some of its original red enamel still showing amid the rust soon after arrival. I was able to wash it clean enough to use, otherwise I would have had to pay for one. An elderly man had longed to possess a gold Schaffhausen watch all his life. He bought one for ten centimetres of bread, to be paid off at the rate of one centimetre per week. Unfortunately he died soon after he finished paying for it.

The market was conducted anywhere at all, it didn't require a specially designated spot and was carried on constantly, without a stop, even while we stood in line-up, although activity peaked whenever food was distributed to us and cigarettes to the guards. They were the only source of supply for the many smokers, captives never received any, only soup and bread. Values fluctuated according to supply and demand. Immediately after the distribution of soup or bread, the price would drop right down, but climb steadily — especially of bread — until by the fourth breadless, starving day the price would climb to double. Whatever you might have for sale, whether it was socks or a blanket or a piece of soap, you made a deal for the current price and stuck to it, even if payment had to be deferred until distribution day, or was on a part payment basis, in which case exact amounts were hammered out as to how many centimetres of bread or how much soup you were to be given each time food or cigarettes were brought in, whatever the deal may have been. There were plenty of clothes for sale after a short time because as people died their clothes and other effects were appropriated by the 'undertakers', who took charge of the corpse, undressed it and carried it to the gate. Sometimes, somebody else got to the corpse first, but in every case the items came on the market sooner or later. The 'undertakers' didn't go hungry.

The guards sometimes brought in bread to sell for gold or well-known brands of watches. These were available for between five and ten centimetres of bread, or a gold chain for two or three cigarettes. This buying and selling and the information about prices was our sole occupation and of constant interest. Everyone was well informed of current prices and all transactions, although merely verbal, were made in the full knowledge that debts had to be honoured. Conditions made this imperative. The greedy were the only losers, they failed to reckon with the demands of their bodies, which gave up the unequal battle when denied the centimetres of bread. Their corpses were thrown on the death cart and the 'undertaker' inherited the gold watch or whatever.

In the briefcase I had picked up on our trudge through the snow was a silver cigarette case, a few items of clothing and lots of letter paper. I managed to sell the paper (there were many among us who could not do without toilet paper), together with the cigarette case, for two centimetres of bread. It was the best business deal I had transacted in my life.

Cleanliness – or rather the lack of it – was one of the many hardships we had to endure. During the four months I spent at the camp, there was only one occasion when I had all my clothes off at once, and that was when we were taken to be de-loused. I had no change of clothing. I wore every article I owned because it was so cold, and I failed in every one of my many attempts to force myself to get undressed and wash, as the women did. It brought goose pimples to my skin just to watch them standing barefoot in the icy puddles on the concrete floor in the middle of winter in that desperate cold. They regularly got completely undressed and washed themselves from crown to sole. Their bodies steamed. They washed their clothes, too, and to see them sloshing about in the wash-house made me shrink into myself even more. That they didn't die on the spot is one of the great wonders, but they didn't even catch cold. On the whole, the women bore the camp life better than the men and there were fewer deaths among them.

They kept themselves occupied much more than the men. What with the daily washing and chasing up of husbands to do the same, looking after their children, they didn't seem to suffer that dreadful purposelessness and defeatism that the men were so powerless to combat. We just shrunk into our clothes in order to expose the least area to the seeking wind and dropped like the target ducks in a side-show, one after another. The unattached young, like myself, were the worst off, for we had no idea how to best manage our daily lives. The adults always seemed to find enough self-control to put away some of their food for the time, which they knew of a certainty would come, when things would become worse. We were unable to imagine how it could get any worse and wolfed whatever we were given in the most improvident fashion, starving afterwards in the many foodless days that followed, until our eyes stared out of our skulls from the very depths of their sockets. Even the lice seemed to bother us more than the others, at least we felt it to be so.

By the second foodless day I would lay solid plans to save some of my next portion for later, but when it came, the way I felt, there was serious doubt whether I would be alive later, and the longest my savings ever lasted was one hour.

In the dark barracks during the long evenings the subject of food inevitably came up sooner or later and, incredibly, we humorously (we always had humour) dwelt on how this one's wife or that one's mother cooked a particular dish. At first guffaws of laughter dotted the darkness but as the claims of a particular person being the best cook flew ever thicker and, for proof, descriptions of the amount of fresh cream that was used in some dish or other doubled and redoubled, our imagination set the saliva flowing and our stomachs would writhe in empty agony. The food was denied us but our minds could not be shut off and we ranged over the most luscious and luxurious foods of every variety and found it a morale booster in spite of the pain. One might have said, in fact we often did, that life in the camp was a slow death. We did no work and apart from the daily muster, had no regular occupation of any sort. Every day more and more people were brought in, by the thousands. The Germans had the minimum daily needs of a captive worked out exactly. According to the best-informed rumours, Bergen-Belsen had been built for ten thousand people but by the time I arrived there were more than fifteen thousand and by the middle of February 1945 there were in excess of forty thousand. Thus, it was impossible to produce that carefully worked out minimum, even with the best of intentions.

When we first arrived we each received a centimetre of bread per day. By the time we left, more than a week passed before our turn came round again because the bakery simply could not cope with the numbers. It was the same with the coffee, and the soup, which was made of some kind of turnip called *doergemuze.* These were distributed on ever increasingly rare occasions, until, in the end, we were happy if we saw something to eat once a week. Hunger had become a way of life. As time passed, I seemed to feel it less than I had in the wagon but did notice that my muscles didn't obey; to get up, to move, to lift an arm, even to think, was an effort.

The man on the bunk below mine was called Fatman, and he had been really fat when we arrived. He had weighed at least a hundred kilograms. He used to go around showing, by the way his trousers hung, how much weight he had lost. He was a man of experience and took me, not into his care exactly, but under his eye. I felt we had a special relationship, that he cared. He used to drink the liquid from his soup and give me the vegetables left on the bottom. This was a tremendous thing both physically and morally for no one had enough for themselves, let alone to give away. He gave me a piece of soap and a pair of socks in return for taking out his bottle at night for he was reluctant to walk the half kilometre to the latrine. He would explain to me the best way to survive under the circumstances and helped me in every way possible.

He was a mechanical engineer and had worked at the ironworks at Csepel, to where he travelled from Ujpest every day. His parents were born in Budapest. He knew that his wife had been taken to the ghetto there but he had no idea of the whereabouts of his three children. He had been an active member of the ironworkers' union all his working life. When the serious troubles began one of his Christian workmates hid him in his coal cellar but another tenant in the building had become suspicious and had informed the authorities. Fatman had been discovered and was taken to an internment camp at Kistarcsa, from where he managed to escape. He suspected that his workmate had been imprisoned for having hidden him, but could obtain no definite information.

He had approached another workmate to see if he could give him refuge or, by putting their wits together, they could find some sort of solution. His colleague couldn't help so he went to a sort of camp for Jews he had heard of in Kolombusz Street, there was nowhere else left to go. There the Arrow-Cross thugs entered on 5 December, collected everyone, about five hundred people, marched them to Jozsefvárosi Station and put them into wagons.

It didn't take me long to discover that Fatman had a heart to match his size. He guided and advised me and in due course slipped unobtrusively into the space left empty, in succession, by my father, by Andor, then by Viki. Whatever problem I had, I felt I could take it to him. We had many discussions. He maintained that our misery was temporary and I was not to give up.

"You'll see," he encouraged me frequently, "their time will come, these trashy Germans. They will rot worse than we ever did because there is no future for them. We know that it's only a matter of time and the Allies will liberate us and we will be free. But these haughty, dirty toe-rags, what sort of future will they enjoy with their hands covered with blood? Who will liberate them? They will be imprisoned by their own knowledge of the past which they will be unable to forget, will find impossible to erase. These murderers will never be able to sleep – their conscience will not let them."

I drank in avidly whatever comfort I could drain from his words although I did not, I could not, agree with him. I thought otherwise. I knew that the nasty bastards walked all over us because they had no conscience, they were made of stone; but Fatman wouldn't have it. He said that even the hardest stone could be broken and in any case what they were made of was really shit, that all the perfume and *eau de cologne* they poured on themselves was to disguise the stink of it.

"My boy, you are a young lad, if you survive, you'll be breakfasting on such as these when you grow up," he told me. "Don't think they are as stalwart as they look, if you take the wadding out of their uniforms they'll collapse into a heap of manure."

Even though his words didn't put any food into my stomach, nor did they always succeed in scaring despair back into its hole, from where it was forever ready to pounce on me, I did benefit from them. I came to like him very much, in spite of my reluctance to become involved again with people from whom I could be so easily and quickly separated as had happened with my family, my adopted family, and the two old aunts. We all had this tacit reticence, this unwillingness to invest emotion in someone of whom we could be deprived in an instant, without warning. At the same time, it was no comfort to me to survive unless my family was there, waiting for me. Whenever I was unable to maintain my confidence in my father's strength and my mother's endurance I myself had no ambition to survive. At other times I roused myself and saw in my imagination that I was picking the stuffing out of a German uniform with just a little gnome left, begging my pardon on his knees, when I had finished. I would straight away feel like one of the sparrows I was always looking at with envy because they could fly in and out of camp at their will, and ran my hand down my side looking for the wings.

The lice were one of our many torments. They sucked the few drops of poor blood we had left in our emaciated bodies. I had noticed the first one on myself in the wagon and as time went on in the camp, more and more. The bunks were probably lousy by the time we got there. On one occasion we were taken for a delousing session within the camp. We went in groups of fifty, accompanied by guards, about a kilometre away from our barracks. We, men and women together, had to undress completely. Our clothes were put into a kind of oven, where, according to theory, the lice would be killed by heat. We had to go into a hall where pipes fixed into the ceiling poured forth scalding water for three or four minutes. There was no escape from the deluge, it came uniformly over the whole area. After the hot water we received an equally long icy shower. Following this we were pushed outside into the open air where we awaited the arrival of our clothes. Perhaps it was meant well but to us it was torture to endure the burning hot water followed by the icy cold, on top of which we had the January winds in half a metre of snow to dry us. We waited about ten shivering, teeth-chattering minutes until we could once again cover ourselves with our clothes and were bitten instantly by lice made ravenous by the delay and stimulated by the heat. We would have been better off without the treatment because the lice were not diminished, only our suffering increased. Amazingly, I didn't even catch a cold.

A couple of events left a deep impression on me. The first concerned a smart-looking blonde, carefully coiffed German woman officer whom I noticed walking along just on the other side of our compound fence one morning. Her uniform fitted her shapely form to perfection, obviously made to measure, carefully pressed and donned, probably not long before, with attention to detail. The white collar of her blouse contrasted with her dark green jacket. From the opposite direction a cart approached, pushed by eight women captives under guard. A slight thaw had turned the snow into slush and as their paths crossed, the cart-wheel passed over one of the many bumps into a mud-puddle and spattered the spotless uniform. She took a firmer hold of her blackjack and started to hit the captive nearest to her. The guard immediately readied his rifle and kept it pointed at the rest, ordering them to continue their work. The seven women put their backs into pushing the cart. The eighth was left in the mud until the dead-cart came to pick her up on its rounds. This officer, with her impeccable uniform, her cheeks rosy from the wind, and her face expressionless in its severity, typified for me the age we were living in.

I could not understand how so much hatred lived in such a lovely looking creature. I could not imagine that Nazi indoctrination alone was responsible. I felt that it was impossible to inculcate such behaviour, it must have been inborn. She had kept delivering the blows on the thin, weakened body of the unlucky woman. I turned it over in my mind and tried to figure it out. When she had finished she calmly jerked her jacket back into place and continued on her way. A daughter of one of the world's most civilised nations, a nation that had bred Beethoven, Mozart and Goethe — a creature of G-d, but one who held Hitler, Goering and Goebbels as her ideals. I couldn't stifle my questions: where was brotherly love; how had they changed direction; turned on to this road? The questions upset me but I couldn't stop them, I couldn't stop my thoughts, my memory. What would happen if the Germans were to win? Would they extend their ideas, their system, to England and to America as they had done in Hungary? Would a lunatic like Hitler be accepted for a leader, as he had been by the Germans, or were they the only ones who could be hypnotised; that a beautiful woman should turn into a monster and an eighty-million-strong nation into agents of Satan. It was beyond me.

The second event started a few days later when it was announced at the morning line-up that the guard had seen a man taking potatoes from the heap in front of the kitchen during the night and climbing back into our compound. If the man didn't come forward and own up every tenth person would be shot before our eyes.

A man from my barracks, about forty, slightly bald, below medium height, eventually stepped forward. He didn't speak but made gestures like our deaf mutes in the barracks. He was taken away. About ten days later he was brought back, looking terrible from beatings, but alive. We had to contain our eager curiosity for a few more days until he recovered enough to talk.

"I got the idea to pretend to be deaf and dumb almost before they finished speaking," he said, in answer to our many questions. " The thief wasn't owning up and I thought if I could pull off the pretence it would be like a red herring, and in any case they couldn't communicate with me. I would certainly never speak a word to them," he claimed with triumph.

"How were they going to prove that I could lip-read German?"

"Weren't you scared?" came from many questioners.

"I was more afraid of the idea of the massacre that would have followed," he replied.

"Didn't you regret your heroics later?" asked the oldish man next to me, as if he had heard my unvoiced question.

"Yes, many times, when I was beaten. They were determined to make me talk and admit that I could, but afterwards I was glad, I have always wanted to do something of the sort, something to outwit them, even if they killed me, and I thought they would! I never for a minute thought that I would survive." He basked in all the attention his heroism had brought him and did indeed survive, at least till the day I left the camp, and when I saw him last his condition led me to hope that he would continue to survive and be liberated and do well in life. I know we all hoped so. If only we could have had a few more like him!

Day by day life became harder to maintain. Captives continued arriving by the thousands from every part of Germany where the front was approaching. A great many of them were Russians, but also Dutch, French, Polish, Hungarian and Slovak. We, on the other hand began to diminish. Our systems had become accustomed to the starvation but our health and strength could not endure.

Every night somebody, a rabbi, or one of the self-appointed morale boosters, would come with 'news'. He would tell about wagonloads of beans having arrived so that it wouldn't be long before we would get some real bean soup. He would emphasise how important it was to keep clean, to keep after the lice, "because we want to go home!" This became our daily motto, our catch-cry. He used to get us to chant it together. All of this happened in the dark, no lights were allowed to be shown for fear of air raids.

We would lie in our bunks and listen to whoever was talking. One would begin and tell about how his wife used to prepare chicken: roast or boiled or perhaps *paprikás* (in chili sauce). Or, what kind of salad was best with a particular dish, whether cucumber or lettuce; which kind of cake was best, whether of yeast dough or beaten egg mixture. Often quite serious arguments developed about the best method of preparation for a particular dish (the onions were not to be fried, only gently sauteed) while the rest of us swallowed saliva as we listened to all the cooking. Finally, we would fall asleep, the hungry growling of our stomachs competing with the voices in the dark while the lice feasted.

The nail on my right thumb became infected and swollen and hurt so much that I couldn't kill the lice even when I managed to catch them. This otherwise petty inconvenience caused me a serious problem. Had my neighbours noticed that I was not doing my share they would have thrown me out of my bunk. I had to keep my misery a secret.

Slowly, winter began to give way to spring, the sun could be seen more often and its strength felt. We all tried to find a sunny spot because every bit of warmth made a difference in our weak condition.

March the fifth was my sixteenth birthday. I sat in a sunny corner and watched a sparrow as it flew about, all unconscious of how lucky it was to have been born a bird during Hitler's rule.

For the first time I allowed the question: "What am I doing here?" to fully rise to my consciousness. I was just sixteen and to my knowledge had never done anybody any harm, and if by chance I had, certainly it was not bad enough to have been condemned to this. I had hardly started to live. All the other people, many of whom were not even Jews, were locked up in this camp with me. Why? What was it that we had done, what crime had we committed? I knew very little history, in fact I knew very little about anything having had the minimum of education; perhaps that was why I couldn't comprehend.

I and my fellow prisoners were dirty, hungry, lousy, lethargic and ragged, unable to help ourselves; but our guards were neatly dressed, cleanly shaven, muscles bulging, boots gleaming, close-trimmed hair shining in the sun as they strutted among us, their contempt like a halo around their heads, held high. In school, in the newspapers, these Germans had always been acclaimed as the leaders in culture. It was their music, their literature, their technical know-how, their language that was admired, taught and copied because it was considered the best. Now all that had been put to use to build the most efficient murder machine to lock us up, to kill us.

It was also Purim. I was born on the first day of this Festival of Lots. We talked about the book of Esther, always read in the synagogues at this time; how she had managed with the help of her uncle to rescue the Jewish people from Haman's evil designs. As it is written, Haman had convinced the king of Persia that the Jews were a disloyal people and had a gallows made on which Esther's uncle was to be hanged while the rest of the Jews were killed by the populace, who would be allowed to keep all the property they could loot from the Jews. As it turned out the truth was discovered in time and it was Haman who was hanged on the gallows he had prepared. We certainly needed an Esther, with or without her uncle!

Passover came a month later. There is no connection between the two festivals except that they both celebrate events that happened to Jews. One of the important adjuncts of Passover is the eating of unleavened bread. This is to remind us of the haste with which we finally left Egypt; there was no time for the bread to rise and our ancestors baked and ate it as it was. There were many among us who refused to eat the tiny, occasional piece of bread we were given during that period of Passover! Our plight was so bad that I was sure it was worse than our ancestors' in Egypt during the slavery, yet these people's faith remained unbroken. They didn't care how little soup they managed to get in exchange for their bread, they didn't cease to observe the tenets of religion to the very last shred of possibility even in those times and in such conditions. There was one among us who used to talk about religion and observance during those night-time conversations. He used to say that we could not afford to relax our observance because of "times and conditions" because we had had those so often in our history that we would have had no observance left. I often longed for a faith, a belief, like that. His eyes lit up when he explained to anybody willing to listen that G-d does see and know what is happening, also the reason why it is happening. He could never explain it to my satisfaction. I felt that G-d had completely forgotten us, had abandoned us. I felt that since there is only one G-d, the one the Germans believed in had to be the same one and He had given them food; He had given them guns as well so they should be able to lock us up, to starve us, beat us and kill us. It seemed to me that the more religious a person was the harder it was to believe in a G-d who would permit all this. I thought about it often and long but I wasn't sure. It was not clear. Nevertheless, it was beautiful, it was a comfort to see a certainty, a conviction in so many others who possessed faith and to whom it provided concrete help. I knew for sure only that the Germans had no fear of our G-d, and that they felt strong in theirs.

The only news we heard were rumours, the so-called 'latrine news', so named because they were suspected of having been concocted there, and certainly, that was where they were mostly passed on, while queuing up for or actually sitting on the latrines. At least, that is what I assumed, and although I never did discover where they originated, quite often they turned out to be correct. But their accuracy or otherwise was not as important as the fact that we had them. No matter how often you went to the latrine, there would be something new to hear, something on which to base your flights of fancy, to keep your hopes up for a little while; to fill your stomach with fantasy bean soup or lentils – or just fantasy.

"The Americans landed parachutists at *x*; the English have occupied *y*; the Russians had taken *z*; another week, a month at the outside and the Germans will capitulate; bombing raids have razed such and such a city and the Germans were fleeing in panic; the whole country was in chaos as the Russians approached Berlin." Without the 'latrine news' we would have yielded much more easily, our spirits would have shrunk together with our bodies. With them our souls were truly unconquerable.

When I heard the story, much later in life, of the old Arab whose afternoon snooze was disturbed by noisily playing urchins, I again contemplated the nature of 'latrine news'. It seems he made it known to the bothersome youngsters that figs were being given away at the other end of the village. Restful, rightful silence had hardly descended, together with a few flies, when the wily old man roused himself with a snort: "What am I doing here when there are figs to be had at the other end of the village?" and he hastened off for his share.

No one among us had any means of obtaining news from the outside. The only reliable source of news was the continuing stream of new arrivals, with whom, however, my group never came into direct contact. Had we thought about it we would have realised that even that news was not fresh, for the new arrivals would have spent many days in wagons on their way to the camp, just as we had all those endless days, weeks before. Our section was separate, only the guards could come and go, we didn't even catch a glimpse of a civilian from afar. The guards never spoke to us. The doubtful, unreliable unconfirmable 'latrine news' kept the lethargic blood moving in our veins, pushed our weary chests for yet another effort to inhale one more breath, and then one more.

We knew that the war was going badly for the Germans. Not exactly and not in detail, but we knew that the end was in sight, only we didn't know which of us — if indeed any — would live to see it. As for me, at the moment of crossing the border the conviction solidified in me that I would not be one of the survivors of this *Gehinnom,* (hell).

The most important item of information was the daily 'stock exchange report', that is, the daily rate of trade values: how many centimetres of bread was equal to a blanket and whether one could still get a pair of socks worth having for a portion of soup.

For some, life ceased altogether. The corpses were brought out every morning and piled up by the compound gate. The pile was ever larger as time passed. I expected the boy whose arm had been shot to be among the first, but a doctor took out the bullet as soon as he was dragged into camp and, much to our satisfaction, he recovered. As far as I knew he survived, as did the Merchant of Szeged. A cart, dragged by captives, collected the bodies – in the first weeks one or two, but by the end of February 1945 I saw more than ten every time. They were unceremoniously dumped into the cart, which was pushed and pulled over the uneven terrain with great effort and difficulty about a kilometre to the crematorium. From our compound we could see wisps of smoke coming from its tall chimney. The stench was always with us.

A constant source of wonder and a favourite topic of conversation was the absence of many of the common sicknesses, like colds, flu, pneumonia, kidney or stomach ailments – one man recovered from duodenal ulcers and another from chronic constipation. We had no dentist and even had there been one, he could have done nothing, because there were no instruments. I used to suffer from sore throats and indigestion, but all the time I spent in camp, in the cold and slush, eating that unmentionable food – when there was some – I never had either complaint, and neither did I hear of others having them. The doctors were nagged for their opinion, which they were reluctant to give because it was untested, unsupported and unscientific, but they finally concluded the "lack of food prevented many sicknesses but killed the patients".

The triple scourge of hunger, exhaustion and diarrhoea caused many of the deaths but we put it more simply: "the lice ate us up". About five hundred died from my original group of fifteen hundred in the four months I spent in Bergen-Belsen.

The latrine news asserted that the Allies were nearing us. Indeed, the sounds of planes and bombardments became more frequent. Another rumour had it that English parachutists had landed in Hamburg, not too far from us.

On 6 April, the guard told us to have fifteen hundred people at the gate by eight o'clock the next morning, ready to leave. They didn't specify who should go. Many wanted to leave and many didn't since we had no idea where we were to be taken. I decided to go. With their usual precision, punctually at eight o'clock the guards arrived and counted off the required fifteen hundred people. I noticed a few blades of grass sprouting by the gatepost as we were standing there. The first, the only bit of green, of freshness, the eye could see. The gates opened and we started off with our bundles, once again trudging the same road by which we had come four months before, except that now we looked like skeletons. We had had neither soup nor bread for days but I felt I would rather die anywhere else than in the camp that had sapped all my strength and will. We had little enough prospect of survival here or elsewhere, judging from the confidence and continued military bearing of the Germans. It was difficult to maintain belief in liberation in the face of it.

There was a huge heap of beetroot by the tracks, just in front of the train sitting on the railway line. We fell upon it and each took as many as we could. To our amazement, the guards said nothing. I took about fifteen into the carriage with me. The train started off and we tucked into our beetroot feast. They were lush, full of sweet, burgundy-coloured juice.

The carriages were fitted with wooden benches, so we didn't have to sit on the floor, in the muck, and there was room for our legs and hands, which were this time not subjected to being stepped upon. Nevertheless, I mostly sat on mine, for every jolt of the train flashed through my whole body and caused immense pain at the point of contact, almost directly with my bones. We had no communication with the guards in any way after they counted us into the carriage, according to the number of spaces, we supposed. They didn't give us anything, didn't say a word. They didn't even demand anything from us. They placed us there, shut the doors, and there we sat.

We journeyed six days, I don't know where. The stations presented quite a different picture as we passed them. All had been bombed, the buildings were in ruins, the wagons and carriages we saw burnt out, the tracks bent and broken. No more rattling along this time, we would travel for an hour and stop for ten on some siding or out in the fields. We could hear cannonade almost continuously and also planes passing overhead. An anti-aircraft gun was mounted on one of the wagons and we heard it firing again and again. Incredibly, they still seemed more preoccupied with us than with their enemy overrunning German soil, just as it had been in Hungary.

After the war I heard it claimed several times that we had been used as hostages to prevent the Allies bombing the train, which was carrying essential or precious armaments. I saw nothing to confirm such a theory, but of course, I could see very little from inside the carriage. There was a rumour that we were on our way to Terezienstadt, another camp.

A boy of about my age cut his wrist. He had completely covered himself with a blanket. We examined him when we noticed that he wasn't moving and found a tiny drop of blood on the cut. We puzzled about it for a long time, and wondered why he died since he hadn't bled to death. I thought I had become used to it all but this suicide shocked me anew.

My stock of, this time carefully managed, beetroot was on the wane and I faced starvation once again in the train, stained by our beetroot coloured urine and excreta. I caught a glimpse into what the suicide's feeling must have been.

When we came to a halt, about two kilometres past a village, on the afternoon of 13 April 1945, the doors were opened and the Germans disappeared.

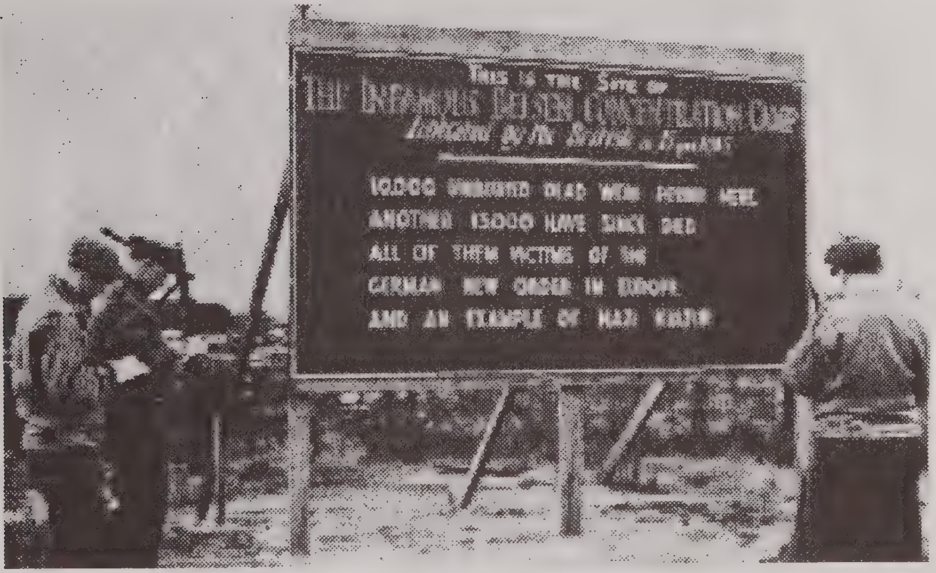
We looked into all the carriages and wagons until we came to the last three. There was no one inside, so we opened them and found military kits, in their original packaging, consisting of uniforms and helmets. There were bandages and other odds and ends, amongst which I found a bottle of brandy. I also found a soldier's summer uniform shirt and trousers. A middle-aged man soon diddled me out of the brandy by convincing me that his need was greater than mine, but I kept and wore the clothes. I had no others for a long time after.

All of a sudden we heard an uproar from the front of the train and when we went to investigate found two American soldiers there. They had helmets on and rifles in their hands. Their uniforms bristled with pistols. There was shooting all around us but we observed no fighting.

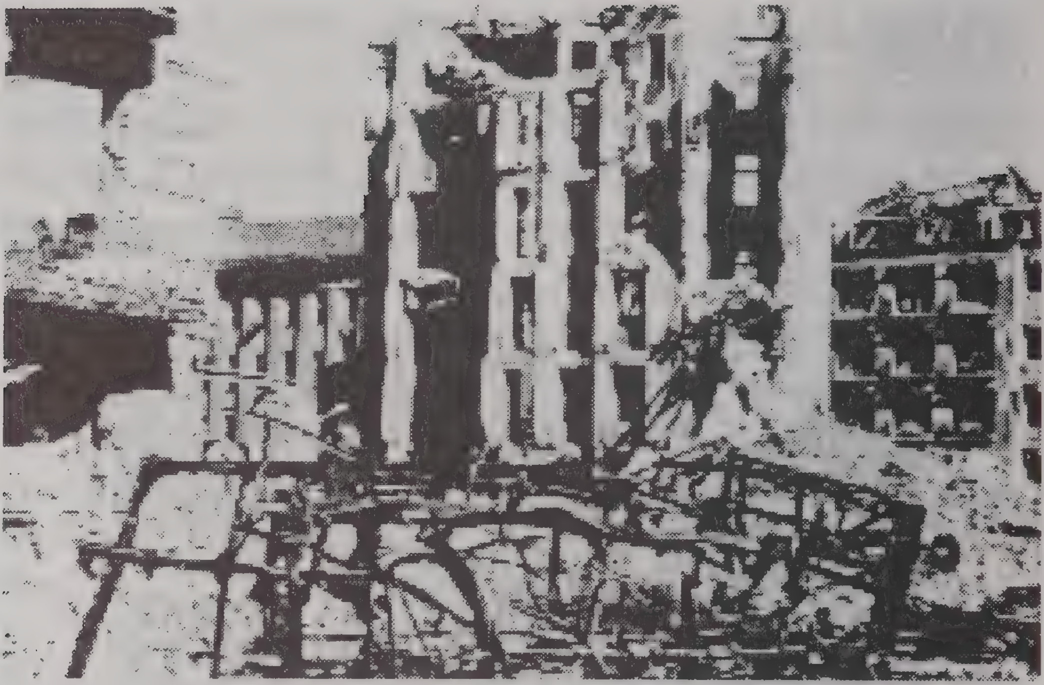
We nearly tore those soldiers apart in our joy; everyone wanted to touch them. Soon, more soldiers arrived. Had G-d descended from heaven we could not have been happier.

I cannot begin to describe what those soldiers tried to do to help us. They brought and gave us every bit of food they had: chocolates and tins of food. One drove off to the village in his jeep, shot five geese and brought them to us so that we could cook them on an open fire and eat them. We had neither dishes nor implements of any kind for such an exercise; nevertheless, we tried every way we could think of to make those geese edible. In the process we became covered with their blood, and the countryside with their feathers, but in the end we had to leave them there uneaten.

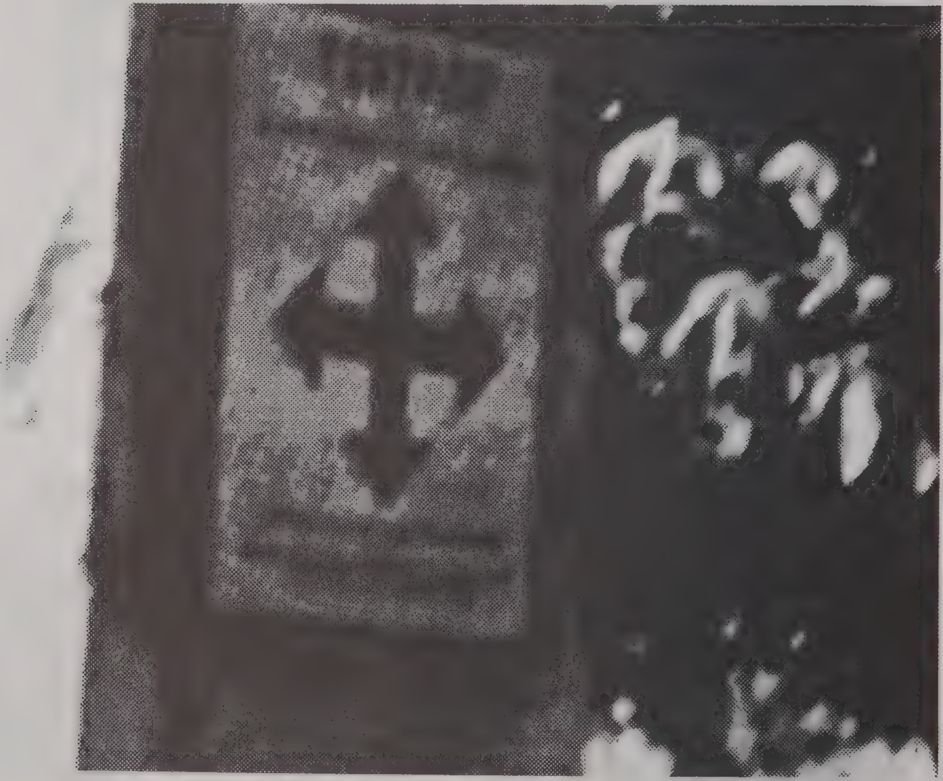
The ovens in the crematorium, Belsen.


This is the site of
The Infamous Belsen Concentration Camp
Liberated by the British on 15 April 1945
10.000 unburied dead were found here
Another 13.000 have since died
All of them victims of the
German New Order in Europe
and an example of Nazi Kultur

Belsen was burnt down by the British to prevent epidemics.

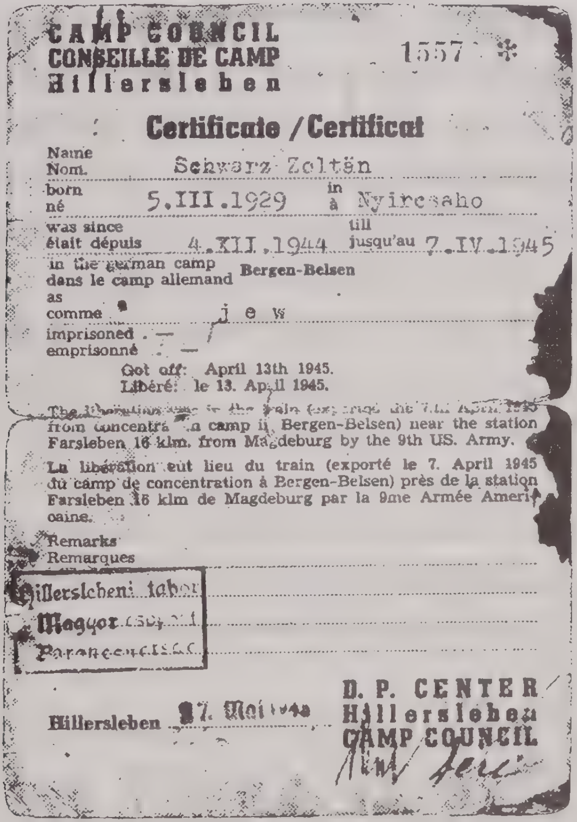


Budapest after the war.



The Arrowcross Emblem.

Wagons like those in which we were transported.



CAMP COUNCIL
CONSEILLE DE CAMP
Hillersleben

1557

Certificate / Certificat

Name / Nom. Schwarz Zoltän

born / né 5.III.1929 in / à Nyircsaho

was since / était dépuis 4.XII.1944 till / jusqu'au 7.IV.1945

in the german camp / dans le camp allemand Bergen-Belsen

as / comme jew

imprisoned / emprisonné —

Got off: April 13th 1945.
Libéré: le 13. April 1945.

The liberation was in the train (exported the 7th April 1945 from concentration camp in Bergen-Belsen) near the station Farsleben 16 klm. from Magdeburg by the 9th US. Army.

La libération eut lieu du train (exporté le 7. April 1945 du camp de concentration à Bergen-Belsen) près de la station Farsleben 16 klm de Magdeburg par la 9me Armée Americaine.

Remarks / Remarques

Hillerslebeni tabor
Magyar [illegible]
[illegible]

Hillersleben 7. Mai 1945

D. P. CENTER
Hillersleben
CAMP COUNCIL

Certificate issued by the US Army, to Zoltán on 7 May 1945

4. LIBERATED

Friday the thirteenth at any time, but particularly in April, is generally considered unlucky. For us, the fifteen hundred raggedy scarecrows, it was, and has been ever since, a day of deliverance. The American Army was the saviour, the host of angels sent by G-d, the liberator, the first injection of life into the walking skeletons. I prayed that He may bless every step of each and every one of those soldiers, that they may never know want, that they may always see clearly the consequences of mob-rule, of dictatorship, and remember what such a system is capable of and to what it may lead; that a degenerate leadership is able to oppress nations; that it is remarkably easy to influence people for evil.

The soldiers who first reached us were front-line fighters and their orders had not included our rehabilitation! They stopped as long as they felt it possible and passed on the information that they had found a long line of wagons full of starving, possibly diseased, captives in such and such a sector. When we saw them talking on their telephones we surmised that it was about us and we knew we had been correct when soon a truckload of others appeared and these, with handkerchiefs over their faces, tried to assess the situation and create some sort of order, but, of course, it was impossible. Already two dead were laid out beside the track. The soldiers stood there waiting for inspiration for they had not an inkling where to start and how. We, having exhausted ourselves with unaccustomed activity and emotion, just sat there gaping at them, unable to communicate, just as helpless.

Eventually, the considerable efficiency of the American military machine was put into action on our behalf. An enormous quantity of rice cooked in milk arrived by evening, the first proper food we had seen in months. Also, a team of thirty doctors arrived, I couldn't imagine what for, since I was sure they had never learnt in any medical school how to cope with that particular situation, nor had the medicine yet been invented which we were in need of. It seemed to me that it would take years before any improvement would be noticeable. It wasn't only our bodies but our whole being, our ability to function, that was also wrecked. We had lost the power to think clearly, we could not plan logically. When the rice was dished out we just couldn't wait our turn to be served one after another, we rushed to the cauldron and the soldier couldn't carry on because of the crowding. In the end the whole thing tipped over, the rice poured out on to the ground, from where we picked it up in handfuls and stuffed it into our mouths. A few more died as soon as the last mouthful reached their stomachs.

We were about thirty kilometres from Magdeburg, the place where the American Army met the Russians. Nearby was Hillersleben, which had been a German military summer resort for officers. The Americans emptied this resort for us and on Sunday morning they put us into trucks and took us there. The soldiers were so patient with us in our wild state, as if they had really been angels, and they needed to be to get anywhere. During the two days six more of our number died.

The resort was truly beautiful. It had been built for high-ranking officers and their families. There were a few shops, a large hospital and a school as well as the accommodation buildings and a church. By the time I arrived, there were no apartments left vacant so I moved, together with another boy, into a ground floor room in a long pavilion with a carefully tended flower bed in front, full of colour. Within two hours of our arrival the entire lovely building was covered in excreta. We all had diarrhoea. As soon as I swallowed a mouthful, it went through me like water through a pipe. I just could not wait until I reached a toilet. Our digestive systems were unable to cope.

There was a communal kitchen where the cooking was done day and night without stop, not because we ate so much but because we kept going in and taking food to hoard in our rooms. We were simply unable to believe that there was enough, that there could ever be enough. I alone took enough food to my room to feed fifty. We never stopped carrying, although we ate not a mouthful, any of us; we feasted only with our eyes. On one single trip I took thirty meatballs as well as vegetables, which I never tasted. I had more than a hundred loaves of bread stowed away.

At last the military authorities decided to issue food coupons, not because they begrudged us the food — they wished we would eat it, for our own sakes and also so that we would be less painful to look upon — but because they had to resort to some method whereby they could get us to co-operate in any kind of health programme. From then on, we had to have our coupons stamped to show that we had received an injection or had had our heads shaved or had had a dose of D.D.T. pumped into our clothing before we could get any food. It was quite common-place to see a group of five soldiers walking along the street armed with D.D.T. pumps instead of rifles and we had to open our pants for them to pump in the powder against the lice. For cigarettes, too, we needed a stamp. I didn't smoke at that time but turned up for my share nevertheless, for it was unthinkable not to take what was offered whether we needed it or not.

The authorities had a hard time in their efforts to return us to normal without hurting us further. It was almost as if they had to help us in spite of ourselves.

I had trouble with my legs. They swelled. I could make a hole anywhere I pressed with my finger; the doctor said it was oedema and prescribed liver injections. I had about thirty, very painful and, at first, frightening. I had never had injections before, but they did help. As well, a running abscess appeared in my left armpit which had to be lanced — also very painful. People were still dying, one after the other. They simply lowered their eyelids and didn't raise them again. In spite of the care and help after the liberation about four died daily. I think I would have died too, except that I used to go every day to an onion field I had found near the pavilion, pull up the young shallots, take them home and eat them with bread and butter. I preferred it to the cooked food, it tasted really good. I felt those juicy, crisp white stems healing me from the time I set eyes on them. That is not to say I took no more food from the kitchen, however.

Not long after we arrived at Hillersleben the authorities had some fifty Germans, former camp guards, brought in to clean up the buildings and the streets, to help in the hospital and in the kitchen. The picture had changed completely, although we did not as yet look much better than we had in the camp. On the other hand, the Germans' 'light of life' had dimmed. They no longer looked so superior, their muscles no longer bulged, the haughtiness of their bearing had slipped and they began to look more like us. They no longer issued commands as if they were commandments. I discovered that, after all, they didn't possess any sort of special qualities at all. Difficulties that we had shrugged off they found themselves hardly able to cope with. They no longer looked masterly enough to keep people out in the snow for hours, nor to beat them to death. Nonetheless, we were not able to accept them, we would not allow them to give us the injections, neither could we allow the helpers in the hospitals to touch us.

I had been liberated, I had my freedom, but I did not know what to do with it. The Americans did their best to return us to a civilised form of life but we wandered about as if we had come from another planet and were completely unfamiliar with the workings of this one. While we were under the Germans we had been told, ordered, imposed upon. Now that we were free and there was plenty to eat, it was difficult to get the will active again and work out what the next step should be. We doubted, with good reason, that we would ever be able to fit into a normal life again. We carried on hoarding food, each one taking enough for a twenty-member household and we continued to push and shove, I as much as anybody, when the food was dished up, until we held it in our hands, for fear that it would run out before our turn came. Our bodies were puffed and our legs simply hadn't the strength to support them. In spite of being pumped twenty-five times a day with D.D.T. we didn't succeed in getting rid of the lice. We wore the clothes we had had in camp, augmented by what we could find. I had the uniform I had found in the wagon, made for a person twice my size, which I had tacked together so as to be able to wear it. Every day I heard of this one or that one having died, their bodies unable to return to normal. We were full of uncertainty.

News came that the Germans had been beaten and that the war in Europe was over. As much as we had longed for this while we were in the camp, it now, surprisingly, failed to awaken that special joy. It wasn't as I had pictured, what I had expected. I wondered once again, as I had done constantly during the past year, where my family could be.

The next news brought the information that those under eighteen who wished, could go to Palestine. Above all, I wanted to find my family; I could consider nothing before that, and told Fatman so when I went to consult with him. I told him that I intended to return to Hungary at the first opportunity in order to look for them. As always, he helped me with advice, but more, by listening to me, by showing me that he wanted my good, as he had done since we met.

"My boy, there is nothing for you in Hungary, the world is a large place, you are sixteen years old, go and open up the borders. Forget the Hungarians. You will find your family if they are alive, and then you can return if you need to or want to. Go! You never know, you may find yourself a good life yet somewhere." I listened to his advice and put my name down to go.

Within a week trucks fitted with benches arrived for us and we started off on the first leg of our journey – to Buchenwald. The trip was extremely tiring and painful. We sat for more than ten hours, developing corns on our scrawny buttocks, while our bones rattled and knocked together like crockery on a cart, looking at the German countryside, the result of Hitler's efforts. We saw bomb-pitted roads, shattered buildings, broken bridges, burnt-out stations. On the whole trip we saw nothing but ruins. The people didn't live in houses, we saw them crawling out of holes in the crumbled heaps of bricks and mortar. The pomp and triumph of mass meetings resounding with "*Sieg heil!*" and "*Deutschland über alles!*" that I had heard blaring from the radios and seen in newsreels in Budapest so often was nowhere apparent, only people scratching among the wreckage in the hope of finding something to eat, a rag to cover them or perhaps a piece of furniture still of some use — even as firewood.

I kept changing my position from one side of the truck to the other, shifting my weight from one buttock to the other, trying to ease the pressure on my poor bones. My mind kept vacillating, like the rest of me. I was on my way, I had made my decision, but I wasn't sure. It had been a long time since I had been called on to make a decision of any sort. The Arrow-Cross men had ordered me; the Germans had taken me; the Americans had asked me — I had had no choice but to go, to come, to take. Somebody spoke and I had obeyed. Now, I had to make a most important decision. I was asked, "What do you want to do?" and "Where do you want to go?" when, in reality, I didn't yet know, had not understood how I had got there, could not yet take it in that I was still alive, would live past the next few hours. I had only just lost the feeling I had had in the camp that a bullet would thud into me from somewhere, at any minute. Now I had to turn my brain over and force it to envisage a future, for which decisions were again necessary.

The Americans showed us tremendous good will but we didn't speak the same language, in more ways than one. How could a person who had not been with us, had not shared our troubles, understand the problems confronting us? Those who had been with us suffered from the same confused and twisted thinking, the same malaise, and couldn't see past the pile of hoarded bread, further than the crawling lice, any more than I could. I was sure that my family and I would need each other in the future more than we ever had before so how could I decide to leave them — it was unthinkable that my parents, made of stern stuff and used to overcoming hardship all their lives, had not survived. Yet, I knew that I had to get out of Germany, and the sooner the better. Although I could speak a bit of their language, the Germans were still my enemy.

Buchenwald was not in such an impressive location as Bergen-Belsen, surrounded as it was by extensive pine forests. Here, there was easy contact with the city.

In Bergen-Belsen I had seen only what was visible from my compound. In Buchenwald I was a free man and the people who had been imprisoned there showed me, and any others who wanted to see it, the whole set-up. The two weeks we spent in transit in Buchenwald gave us a different insight into what life had been like in the camps.

Here the captives had worked in factories. Those who were judged unfit for work, as well as those who later became unfit, finished up in the crematoriums. The captives who worked in them were changed every three weeks, our guide explained, and the new workers' first task always was to dispose of the bodies of their predecessors, lest they tell the facts. The Germans had tried not to leave any evidence. Nevertheless, we saw hills of worn shoes, mounds of dentures, of glasses, collected from the bodies of the thousands of Dutch, French, Gypsies, Jews, Russians, Belgians, Germans, Yugoslavs, Czechs and others murdered there. We saw the huge piles of ashes, all that remained of the victims, around the crematoriums that had been active without a stop

The guide said that the workers lasted six months, only a few managed to survive longer, but the Germans had not cared because new ones were brought to replace them continually. He had been transferred from Auschwitz, which had been worse, and he was able to show us and tell us and answer the many questions of how Buchenwald compared with Bergen-Belsen and whether they had suffered more because they had to work on the tiny, scientifically calculated amount of food that they had every day, or whether we had suffered more because for days on end we had nothing to eat and nothing to do so we had ample time to contemplate our misery. He concluded that he would make it compulsory for every future politician to tour such a camp at the .beginning of his career, as a sort of awful example of what can happen.

I did not ask him anything because I could not utter the questions that had filled my mind, and I was astonished that the others could. Questions like: "Where was G-d? Where was humanity?"

Another thing that amazed me was that none of us touched the German prisoners going about their everyday tasks. It never occurred to any of us to hurt them. Neither could I bring myself to forgive them. In my mind I excommunicated them from the human race.

Rabbi Marcus, from America, who was officially attached to my group as spiritual guide and healer, was responsible for organising us and our trip. He worked efficiently and managed the gigantic task of moving us, six hundred youngsters, out of Germany so soon after the end of the war, in a few days. A serviceable engine was a rarity, so were train carriages, but he got them together and us aboard. I thought sometimes that he came close to understanding us and our problems, physical and psychological. The second part of his task was no easier than the first because I was not the only one who was vacillating, we all fretted about leaving without first having ascertained the whereabouts of our families.

Physically, the younger ones began to show signs of recovery but the uncertainty persisted and we were all still nervous about being parted from our pile of bread.

Our appearance would have improved much sooner if we had had new clothes. I still wore the uniform I had found, brand new shirt and pants, but I had no underwear and wore the same shoes I had worn in Budapest, now in a dreadful condition. The D.D.T. pumping brigade continued to do its duty by us, although we all agreed that it would kill us in the end and the lice would thrive.

The spring weather was a tremendous aid to our recovery. We ate a lot of fresh, spring vegetables. It was incredible how quickly our bodies responded to wholesome food. We even began to notice the girls passing by, and I became aware of a new, interesting feeling which nearly drove me crazy.

Rabbi Marcus proved to be one of the G-d-sent angels. He never ceased to show forbearance and was a constant source of kindness in spite of our impossible demands, wild behaviour and loud, uncouth manner. He answered us in his patient, quiet voice, in Yiddish, of which I understood very little at that time. He organised and he fixed. It seemed to me that he began to feel as if he had had a part in the dreadful treatment we had suffered – perhaps a little like I had felt when I first saw the pile of corpses by the camp gate, that there must have been something

I could have done to have prevented it. He didn't push religion, he just tried to show us gentleness, humaneness, civility, to prove to us that these things still existed, not only hurt and hatred. One day I saw him arguing with a high-ranking officer and during the course of the argument, he snatched off his helmet and threw it on the ground. They were speaking in English so I didn't understand what was being said.

When the carriages and engine were ready for us, all six hundred of us under eighteen, we got on the train and were on our way. It was far from comfortable but not as bad as the trucks had been. We could only proceed slowly because the tracks had not yet been properly repaired and we constantly had to slow down and even halt.

On one of these stops we happened to be near a cherry orchard where the ripe fruit was being picked. All six hundred of us swarmed out and overran the orchard. We picked and ate the sun-warmed cherries off the trees. When we had eaten as much as we could we threw them around the orchard and finally overturned the full baskets and trod and stamped on the tight-skinned, red, juicy fruit until only the green threads of stems and tiny white stones remained. The pickers just stood there radiating hatred and receiving ours, even more vicious. The Rabbi, poor man, was helpless, with the tears running down his face, from shame, I thought. After we had climbed back on to the train I saw him go up to the pickers, speak to them and give them money.

We had started our journey on 1 June. The halts were frequent because bridges were down, tracks were unsafe and coal was scarce. The driver was an American soldier, another angel, but he spoke no German. When we arrived at a station he couldn't explain what he needed, perhaps an engine part that had broken. Quite often it was unavailable anyway. By the time he managed to explain and the part was found, or something that sufficed, a lot of time passed. It took us seven days to get to Metz on the Franco-German border.

There were two trains next to each other in the station, one was a first-class passenger train and the other consisted of sleepers. Our train stopped and we all got out and were ushered into a large hall where we were treated to dinner. Afterwards we separated into two groups; one group, of a hundred, consisted of those of us who had come from Hillersleben, and the other group was the five hundred who had joined us at Buchenwald. We were directed to the sleeper and the other group to the passenger train.

During the entire six months or so that I had spent on German soil there seemed to be a noisome smell, a smell of something burning, that never left my nostrils. As we arrived in Metz it disappeared.

Zoltan in Paris, June 1945, two months after liberation

Zoltan in Paris, 1947

5. FRANCE.1945

Liberté! Egalité! Fraternité! Perhaps there never was a time when this motto meant more, was needed more, than at that time. Ever since the storming of the Bastille, the French have known how to value freedom and to keep it; no matter how many times they are invaded they come out the victors; no matter how many political parties of opposing views they support, they must at least all feature Liberty.

My native country expelled me squashed into a cattle-wagon. The Germans, who took me over only to destroy me, never even asked my name while I was under their jurisdiction. The French, however, who had not known of my existence and of whom I had heard hardly anything at all until then, carried me, as if a jewel on a velvet cushion, aboard a Pullman sleeper to their capital. I couldn't understand it.

We were welcomed on to this gorgeous train. Each one of us had a bottle of mineral water placed by his armchair seat, which was upholstered and padded. Not only had I never been in such a train, I had never even seen the likes of such luxury, and they had given it to us, lice-eaten refugees, to travel in! Soon after we said good-bye to the people in the other train, and our luxury coach pulled out, the stewards came to convert the seats into beds and to see what else they could do for us. I got the impression that they would have liked to have enveloped us in something soft, like woolly clouds perhaps.

The springs in the seats, combined with the ones under the coach, imparted a rocking motion when the train sped and made short work of my resolve to stay awake, especially after all the excitement and surprise of boarding. I awoke about five in the morning and gazed out of the window from then on. There were many bombed houses in the towns and villages we passed and I saw burnt-out tanks and cars as well. Here, too, the war had left its mark. I tried to read the signs as we went past but could understand not a word, even when I was successful. Not one among us knew any French. Many were younger and had less schooling than I — none had more. The fields were a lively green under the June, early morning sunlight. The flowers covered the scene with a mosaic of a hundred hues. Although my future was still wrapped in uncertainty, I had lost all anxiety about it.

The stewards reappeared about seven o'clock bearing fresh-baked, still warm *croissants* and hot, milky coffee. It was very, very good.

When we had started off we hadn't been told which direction we would be taking and at no stage did we know what our next arrival point would be, including on that occasion, so it was another big surprise when our coach pulled into the *Gare de l'Est* in Paris, capital of France – to me, ever since, the capital of the world. A committee of the French Cabinet, representatives from the French and American military high command, newspaper reporters with photographers, interviewers from the radio stations, and General de Gaulle himself were at the station waiting to greet us. We found out later that we were the very first group to have been repatriated to France. Nobody bothered that we were not French and therefore could not be repatriated. They knew only too well who we were. They welcomed us as the first group of refugees France rescued from the German camps.

They delivered speeches of welcome in which we were told that they knew what we had endured and that it was gratifying that they had been able to pull us out of the 'devil's throat'. There were interpreters working hard to keep up with the translations of the formal speeches and the personal approaches afterwards, when the dignitaries and interviewers spoke to us individually. I found it difficult to cope with the sudden transition in status from a nobody to a V.I.P. The faces of the military leaders were sombre, perhaps with the knowledge of what too much power can lead to, and I thought I saw a fleeting echo of what I had sometimes recognised in the Rabbi, reflected in the faces of the Cabinet Ministers. Still, it was a reception full of wonder for me and the biggest surprise of my life.

After the reception we boarded buses and rode in style to the Hotel Lutétia in the Latin Quarter between Saint-Michel and Montparnasse. It had served as quarters for the German personnel during the occupation and was turned over to the Ministry of Repatriation as soon as Paris was liberated. It was a gorgeous, luxurious hotel of five storeys with a private bathroom to every room, a telephone by the bed, rich carpets on the floor and unlimited hot water on tap, as complete an antithesis to our lives of a few weeks before as it was possible – an oasis to a desert.

There was a restaurant-dining room on the ground floor where five and six course feasts were served to us for lunches and dinners. The V.I.P. treatment continued. We had an endless stream of callers, Members of Parliament and other holders of public office, which we enjoyed, and all ranks of American servicemen, which we didn't, because they came to ask us about their relatives who had also been deported to Germany. To our profound regret, we couldn't help them. All those whose parents and grandparents had emigrated to America from my district came to me to find out about various and sundry relatives. I didn't even know what had become of my own family! What I knew I told, keeping my voice carefully even. Red Cross representatives came on a similar errand, seeking information about people who may have been in camp with us. Their list of missing people about whom relatives were anxious was growing longer by the hour, but we couldn't help them either because we knew no names.

On the other hand, our names and places of origin were read out on the radio and published in the newspapers, with the information that we were alive and well and in Paris. Every day a sightseeing programme was laid on for us and we were taken in buses on guided tours all over Paris. We went to museums, to the Eiffel Tower, the Luxembourg Gardens, the Sacré Coeur, the Madeleine, the Notre-Dame Cathedral, and on one very hot day, as far as Versailles. We enjoyed the bus ride the most; the sight of the wide, bright, busy avenues full of colour and movement gave us a thrill. For the three weeks that we stayed at the Hotel Lutétia, our every moment was taken up, and the only unpleasant aspect of the whole visit was that the D.D.T. treatment continued. Every time I passed through the entrance, coming or going, alone or in a group, I had to open my fly, no matter who was looking. In my sixteen-year-old's imagination, everyone was. I would gladly have suffered the lice instead, but privately. It was the first occasion that I realised that Madame Fortuna (no lady) hid grenades among the pomegranates in her horn of plenty, which she had recently tipped over me.

We went to the movies and saw ourselves, several times lifesize, in the newsreels, taken on the occasion of our arrival. Also on the front page of the newspaper with the Pullman coach as background. We sat through the screening of the newsreel three times because the excitement of watching the scene on the screen was much greater than the actual event had been. The long reel showing the British Forces capturing Bergen-Belsen took me by surprise. I only realised what I was seeing when I heard the name mentioned and so I sat through that, too, many times and watched the barracks, including mine, emptied of people and set alight. I, with the other 1499 who had decided to leave, was liberated two days before our Bergen-Belsen campmates who had remained behind.

After three weeks of V.I.P. treatment we moved out of the

Lutétia and into Meudon, a beautiful summer resort about ten kilometres from Paris, full of gorgeous flower gardens and pure clean air, but we failed to appreciate it — we longed for the stuffy air of Paris. In the meantime the Zionist group leaders arrived and reminded us that the real reason for our having come on this trip was to go to Palestine. We were allocated to groups and informed that buses would take us to Marseilles where we would board a ship to Haifa.

Five of us, Miki, Dagi, Joe, Henri and I, decided to remain in France for the time being, if the French authorities had no objection. In the event, no objection was raised and we received a three-month temporary resident's permit, called a *recepice*, from the Prefecture. It took me nearly that time to learn to pronounce it properly. When the groups left the five of us were lost in the large building so we were transferred to a boys' orphanage at Orly near the airport.

I never worked out just why I decided against going to Palestine. It probably had something to do with the overwhelming effect the royal reception and the change from camp to Paris had on me. For the first time in more than a year I walked around the streets a free man, once again accepted and treated as such and I could not bring myself to walk away from it when I knew that in Palestine, under the British Mandate, this freedom had yet to be won, had to be fought for. I wasn't ready to go into another war.

We had started out with the idea of winning a home where it was neither a shame nor a crime to be Jewish, even fighting for it if the need arose, but after my arrival in Paris I found that I did not possess whatever it was that was needed — moral fortitude, physical strength, or just plain guts. I was never aggressive by nature, rather the contrary. The others didn't take kindly to our defection but there was no real unpleasantness because of it. The parting was very emotional. We had become attached to one another, especially during the weeks of sightseeing trips, and had become almost like brothers. The five of us often talked about them and wondered what had become of them, but we never heard from them. We, who remained behind, became very close. At first we went everywhere together on the basis of five heads being even better than two, mistakenly, as it turned out. It was too cumbersome in the buses and the metro, even on the streets.

It was a couple of weeks before we decided to split into pairs, on the basis of 'best' friends, and I drew Miki. He was like a furry ladder; over six feet, thin, slightly bent forward at the waist and round shouldered. He wore glasses, too, and the black, thickly growing hair on his hands came down to his fingernails. He was from Budapest and was the only city boy among us.

Dagi, of medium height, had been fat, and was on the way to being so again. He was a born actor and performed snatches of drama or recitations of prose or poetry for our entertainment whenever these occurred to him. His friend Joe had completed his apprenticeship as a tailor, back in his village, and found no difficulty in getting a job right away. He was also inclined to chubbiness but had more height to carry it. He had a round-cheeked baby face and was the best tempered of us. Henri was the proud one, from a small village near Dagi's, of good appearance, and had a rich uncle in America. I was the most immature and, next to Miki – I was mostly next to Miki – I looked like his pimply kid brother.

We saw little of Joe once he started to work and, soon, none of Henri, because he left for America where his rich uncle's influence got him a quick entry. A year later he was back with us, stretching the cloth of his G.I. uniform a metre in front of the rest of him in his pride in wearing it. He and his rich uncle had not got on well together and he had joined up and been sent to Germany as part of the occupying forces. He was now playing the conquering hero with us, and the experienced boulevardier, familiar with Paris and her ways, with his army buddies, all of them on furlough there.

Since it was summer, there was neither school nor work in progress. We each received travel passes for train, bus and metro so we roamed Paris every day. People, strangers, came up to us to show kindness and express their sympathy in words and by petting our faces and heads, every way they could. When we joined a queue in front of the movies, three or four people would come up and press money into our hands for the ticket, yet when we offered the money at the box office it would not be accepted. It was the same in the restaurants. People spoke to us and asked us endless questions. It was extremely frustrating not to be able to understand them; we could not answer them, just gaped in stupid silence. I resolved over and over to learn to speak French just as soon as I could.

There was an American military camp near us at Orly. The soldiers were strangers in France, just as we were, and we all tried our best to make friends but it was difficult since our English was no better than our French. None of the Americans spoke Hungarian, not even those whose origins were in that country. They gave us chocolates and cigarettes and we had a lot of fun shouting and gesticulating — a veritable Tower of Babel!

I saw the French national treasures, on those sightseeing tours we went on, through a blur, for it wasn't until I had been in residence at the orphanage some time that I finally received a pair of glasses. The orphanage also arranged my first visit to a dentist. For weeks I suffered a constant ache in my gum, in silence, until it got so bad that it overcame my reluctance to seek an interview with the matron. She arranged the visit to the dentist at once, who put me out of one pain by inflicting another. He explained that the trouble came from my wisdom tooth, which couldn't erupt until he had penetrated my tough gum.

People with whom we could converse, and who made up the bulk of our new acquaintances, were some of the many Hungarian Parisians who had fled Hungary in 1920 after the unsuccessful Béla Kun uprising. They were mostly of Communist persuasion and were very sympathetic towards us. They had organised and founded a so-called Hungarian House, where they held weekly meetings, arranged a programme of entertainment for the weekends, including an occasional ball. Dagi appeared there often and his performances were rewarded with renewed invitations until he decided to return to Hungary. He had Communist leanings, anyway, and thought he would have a better chance of success at home, in his mother tongue, than among the foreigners who knew nought of Madács and the other greats of Hungary. At first we attended all the functions without fail but gradually stopped as we made progress with our French, for they were all much older than us.

The orphanage was a well-run home. The boys were mostly aged from twelve to fifteen and they seemed to find great excitement and pleasure in teaching us, older ones, the language. It was vacation time and after the everyday chores were completed there was nothing to do so they threw themselves into their task with enthusiasm. If one of us managed to pronounce a word that was even barely recognisable they called to one another and jumped up and down, their eager hope of teaching us to speak fluent French fuelled by success, and if the word should still be remembered the next morning, their admiration for our genius knew no limits. Under such positive encouragement we devoured the dictionary in large chunks – the fact that the boys' constant chatter attuned our ears quickly also helped. We felt ourselves improve hourly. Eventually I went to night-school and learnt to speak French quite well.

Girls used to come to dance in the bistro where we met our

American soldier friends, in respect of whom we suddenly turned from pupils into tutors and dazzled their ignorance with our newly acquired expertise, which we paraded in front of the girls with blasé insouciance.

We were taken up by various organisations and families. We received clothes and shoes and our appearance began to improve markedly. I had an embarrassing episode during a visit to one of the families when I mistook the bidet for a toilet. I realised that something was amiss when the thing wouldn't flush. When my hostess came and explained that it was used for washing the genitals, I blushed to a hot crimson and wondered if the accursed thing would perhaps flush me, as I fervently wished to disappear somehow. Later on I realised that it wasn't an accursed thing at all, but quite useful where proper bathrooms were a rare luxury and only to be found in the modern apartments of the rich.

The Fourteenth of July is the French National Day, when they celebrate freedom. After four years of German occupation they let themselves go and celebrated as I have never seen, either before, or since. Every one of the four million inhabitants of Paris was to be found on the streets where they danced to the music pouring from the bistros. The side streets were closed to traffic and given over to dancing, eating and drinking, which continued for three days and nights. French and Allied flags decorated the entire city, fluttering from every balcony, bistro, electric light pole and lapel. The carnival atmosphere was further enhanced by the many colours of the uniforms worn by the members of the Allied Forces — English, American and even Russian — besides the French, many of whom were returned prisoners of war, scattered among the crowd already colourful with the girls' summer dresses.

The five of us enthusiastically joined in the general rejoicing, hardly knowing in which direction to go. We were soon joined by a blonde woman, she might have been twenty-eight or thirty, who started a conversation, of which we understood very little. Eventually, we gathered that she was inviting us to her flat, that her husband, a prisoner of war, was somewhere in Germany and that she had not yet had any news as to whether he was still alive or not, and that she wished to have us represent him on this occasion, to pretend, as it were, that we were him.

She heaped the table with every kind of food, the best fruits and drink. We drank and we ate and before long she seduced all five of us, one after the other. The dammed-up love of four years' repression she poured forth on the five willing recipients of her bounty. She fell asleep there in the bedroom, her breath puffing aromatic wine fumes in quiet rhythm as we softly closed the door on our way out, glad to have avoided an emotion-laden scene that would surely have ensued had she been awake.

It was past midnight by the time we returned to the street to continue on our way, and in a mood for further adventures. We did not have to wait long before five girls joined us, first two, then one and then two more. We explained that we had no money, at which they nearly took offence, saying that they certainly didn't want our money. The group broke up into pairs, with a girl for each of us. Mine was a black-haired, sweet-faced little doll called Claudette, not much older than I, with whom I fell in love the moment she put her doll's hand in mine. We walked the streets of Paris all night, while she spoke to me patiently and slowly so that I would be able to understand her. I had to pay careful attention to hear her, for she had a fine, soft voice. The dimple in her chin deepened as she pursed her lips to enunciate the words clearly.

She told me about how hard it had been during the occupation, how uncertain their lives had been and how people had disappeared without trace from the streets, with never a clue as to where they might be. She talked and I listened, for I understood more than I could speak.

Now and then we stopped to buy some sweets or an ice cream and we finished up on a bench in front of the Madeleine. As we sat there we could see the dark sky bedeck herself with streaks of light to honour the approaching sun. There on the bench Claudette and I drifted into a loving love-play.

This little girl, she knew about a man's sensitivities, her every movement was refined, her lips' touch seeking and desiring and gratifying desire at the same time. I had already had my share in an earthquake that night, there was no urgency, even the sun conspired to delay and allow us to prolong our play. There on the bench by the church in an elegant quarter of Paris I learnt to express love with the most beautiful girl in the entire city. To the French, the Fourteenth of July is the anniversary of freedom, to me it is that and much more. I celebrate it as the anniversary of my transition from an ignorant boy to an aware adult. The blonde taught me about sex, my little dark doll taught me about love, all in one night. The celebrations went on but I had been given, had taken, my portion abundantly already. The parade next morning, in which the various military forces accompanied by brass bands marched up the Champs-Elysée, began early. The underground fighters, the Maquis, also marched in khaki uniforms, as well as former prisoners in their striped uniforms. Some of these had been repatriated from Germany the previous week, in some cases the previous day. I was not ashamed of the tears I could not control, even in my new-found adulthood, as I stood there. They continued to flow for as long as the march lasted, it was so very touching. Many other people, both men and women, were alternately waving their handkerchief and wiping an eye with it.

The drums, the trumpets, the shouting, hugging, embracing and kissing, the marching steps created a vibration in the ground that travelled through into our very souls. It was the first Fourteenth of July after four years of German occupation. I must have heard the Marseillaise at least a hundred times during the three hours of the march-past but its melody didn't pall, the emotions it evoked didn't fade, rather they grew and solidified. Each one of us there, marchers and spectators, every one in his own way, had had our share of what the war had dished out and the atmosphere became charged and enriched with sound and emotion. People came up to us as we stood there gazing at the marchers to pat and even kiss us, calling us and generally comforting us in every way they could think of. Many repeated that such a thing would not be allowed to happen again, never would the world permit it! After the march-past the crowd dissolved but the celebrations continued.

I met Claudette in the evening and she again talked about the dreadful days of the occupation in Paris, about the food coupons, about people being taken to internment camps from where they were sent to Germany. She told me what it was like when the Germans had first come into Paris and each heavy boot tread sounded like one more door clanging shut on the life they had known, and then about how excited and happy they were when the combined French and American forces chased the Germans out at last. I continued to listen for I couldn't express my own feelings or talk about my experiences even if I had wanted to. I was pleased though that I could understand so well what she said. We parted about midnight, after having arranged to meet the following evening, but I didn't see my sloe-eyed doll again. Somehow the splendour of the previous night was missing, I felt unequipped, unable to receive what this lovely and loving girl gave.

A door, the existence of which I had only glimpsed before, was opened before me. The numerous organisations set up for the welfare of the deportees gave us clothes, shoes, money, whatever they thought we needed. These organisations were the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, familiarly referred to as the Joint, the H.I.A.S. (Hebrew International Aid Society), and many others. We used to turn up at the offices of every one, regularly every week, take what they gave and sell it. This was our income. The wearing apparel was too large for me, anyway, and we received far more than we could use. The selling of the clothes was a simple matter for the demand, as of almost everything else so soon after the war, was far greater than the supply in the shops. I spent the money on girls.

We went several times, at specified intervals, to the radio station and read out over the air our own names at the head of a list of names, each in turn, as part of the various language programmes arranged by the Red Cross in the hope that news of us would reach our relatives in our own countries and elsewhere.

Towards the end of August 1945, a letter arrived for me care of the Red Cross. The envelope, a large one, was almost entirely covered with stamps — two million *pengö's* worth. I at once remembered my father's experience with inflation of this kind when his savings of four years' hard work of lugging car parts in faraway Detroit bought him a box of matches after the First World War. It seemed Hungary had done it again!

As soon as I took the letter into my hand I recognised my brother Viki's handwriting and started to shake uncontrollably both inwardly and outwardly for fear of what it might contain. I opened it and read that he had heard my name on the radio and that I was alive in Paris. He said that he was the only member of the family to have returned home. 'My father, mother, two sisters, and eldest brother, aunts and uncles, all were lost, only we two are left of our large family.'

"Why," I asked, "why? Why was my family and all those other families in somebody's way?" Numbers were flung about: six million Jews, twenty million Russians, ten million Germans and the other millions, all perished for Hitler's ideas.

My brother's letter plunged me right back to the hell of camp, and worse, for now I had certainty where before I had been able to hope. When I read the letter I felt again that if they had perished I should have perished too. The guiding and encouraging lights had flickered out in my sky and had left me in utter darkness. I was devastated.

The orphanage staff and boys were very considerate and left me to myself. They were wise in the ways of bereavement. They were familiar indeed with what I was going through. "Time heals all wounds." I didn't believe it.

At last I came to see my dear ones as still living. In my eyes they lived just as I had seen them last, they were with me all the time. I imagined them around me always. This became my conviction and with this conviction I was, and am, able to continue living.

The summer vacation came to an end, trade and commerce started again and with them the time came to begin working. I obtained an apprenticeship with a dental technician where the work was light, and so was the pay. It took me six months to realise that it was not for me. The work required exactitude, which quality I lacked.

My next apprenticeship was with a furrier who had a workroom in his apartment. Besides himself, a cutter and a machinist, both originally from Poland, also worked there. My starting wages were higher than I had had with the dental mechanic after six months. This trade suited my character better. The boss, M. Prager, was the sort of fine person I had come to expect all Parisians to be. Over the two years I was with him he taught me the trade and the many incidentals to everyday life that I had no one else from whom to learn. He was in his early sixties, small, with a little paunch and a lot of curly white hair. He had been a prisoner of war in Germany for four years and this gave him a better understanding of me, my reasons, my feelings, my haste to advance, my impatience with delay. He used to speak to me about whatever came into his mind, perhaps prompted by the news of the day, as we stood there side by side at the workbench, and not only explained how a *mensch* conducts himself, but showed me.

He managed to convince me that it is possible to do the right thing and yet not be imposed upon and if, by mischance, one was imposed upon, by the contraction of certain muscles it was possible to shrug one's shoulder, just so, and continue. Also, that at the age of seventeen I was not yet too old, could still develop into the kind of person I wanted to be, no matter how abnormal my life may have been before. A person was obliged to carry his past with him, like the camel his hump, but was not compelled to dwell on it. One could live in the present, perhaps even in the future.

He used to pay me by the hour. At the end of the week he would ask how many hours I had worked. When I told him, say, forty-five, he would say: "Let's make it fifty." He would then take one of the pieces of chalk that we used for marking out the patterns and work out the amount, chalking up the numbers, right there on the timber of the nailing board.

Mme Prager invited me to eat with them every day, she didn't allow me to go down to the street to buy my lunch. Her three children were grown up and had left home and she more or less replaced them with me. She used to watch with obvious pleasure the gusto with which I put away the tasty food she placed before me.

Miki found a job training to be a machine mechanic. He and I roomed together most of the time and went through whatever life brought, like brothers. On one occasion Joe's machine broke down so he asked Miki to come and fix it if he could. Miki, the expert, ran all the way, hoping to make a few francs on the side, but no matter how he twisted the nuts and turned the screws and muttered "*merde alors*", the stubborn contraption wouldn't yield. He had to give it up; he was not as yet a good mechanic.

Refugees were pouring into France in our wake. As soon as their health improved enough for them to travel, former captives were leaving Germany but it was no simple matter for anyone not wishing to return to their homeland. To America, the country of preference for many, they could go only if they had a relative to sponsor them, were perfectly healthy — even a hint of tuberculosis was a bar — and they were then placed on to the waiting list, for there was a quota system according to countries of origin. The Scandinavian countries and Switzerland had each taken a comparative few from the camps, and that was all. England was not accepting many, she had troubles of her own at home, and also with many places in the Empire, including Palestine where she held the Mandate. Because of Arab objection only a token few of the thousands of Jewish refugees wishing to go there were allowed into Palestine.

France was the country of access and we made friends with many of the new arrivals in the offices of the aid organisations. They had not needed any doctor's certificate, nor entry permit, not even a rich uncle. They simply came up to the border, crossed it, straight into the hands of the border guards, who fined them the equivalent of a few dollars and gave them a thirty days' residence permit. On the basis of this they could come to Paris and receive a work permit as soon as they found jobs, in possession of which a year's residence was granted. Later on several dodges were worked whereby even the minimum fine was avoided. The French authorities shrugged a noble shoulder and turned a blind eye.

France was the only country where the rejected refugees found refuge, by their thousands, legally or illegally.

Because of its location at Orly, the orphanage buildings became too valuable to house orphans and all of us were billeted wherever there was space for us. I had a good job and was earning quite well but still not enough to support myself. Accommodation was scarce in Paris and I could not afford even the cheapest hotel room, so I was placed in an *Oeuvres de Secours aux Enfants* (*O.S.E.*) Home, a home for Jewish orphans like myself, in le Vesinet, a lovely outer suburb of Paris full of tree-lined avenues and villas standing in their own grounds.

The home was about fifteen minutes' walk from the railway station, from where trains left for Paris every half hour until midnight. By this time I could speak French quite well and a mixture of Yiddish and German not so well, for M. Prager spoke mostly German and the cutter and machinist always in Yiddish. My hair had grown, my bones had lost their prominence. All in all I must have begun to look like everyone else; people no longer recognised me as having been a camp inmate. Its outward stamp had disappeared.

Almost as soon as I settled in at le Vesinet I came down once again with tonsillitis. I decided that this was the last time I would let it torture me with a swollen, aching throat, so that I could swallow the mouthfuls of water my high fever made me crave only with great pain and effort. I went along to Rothschild Hospital as soon as I could walk and fixed a date for the removal of my tonsils. By the time the day of the operation came around I was not quite so keen, but turned up nevertheless. The doctor sent me to book a bed for a day's recovery afterwards.

At the office the sister asked my name and age. When I said seventeen, all unsuspecting, she asked, "Is your guardian with you?" .

"No," I said, "I haven't got one."

"You have to come back with your guardian," she asserted with finality, ignoring my problem. "The law says your guardian has to sign you in if you are under eighteen." I couldn't change my age, I looked about fifteen at most.

I went back to the doctor to tell him that the operation would have to be postponed but before I could begin he tied me into the chair and had the anaesthetic tube up my nose, while he growled irritably, "Where have you been so long?"

Of course, when I woke up in an unbooked, unauthorised bed, he was angrier still and wanted to know why I had kept him ignorant of the fact that I had not carried out his instructions. He told me he wasn't used to having so much trouble with half a dozen as I had caused. Next day I was told that my guardian had been called and that I would be discharged as soon as he came and signed the papers.

At the end of four hours I saw the last drop of my patience dissolve into the pattern of the floor, which I had been contemplating, and was not even curious any longer as to who had been landed with me as his ward. I picked myself up and went home. I was enjoying my dinner of ice cream six hours later when the phone call came from the hospital for my 'guardian' to collect me. As far as the official records show, I was never there, but if I was, I am still there.

Spring cannot possibly be as beautiful anywhere in the world as in Paris. It forces the winter's rainy, sleety cold out of the avenues and boulevards and fills them with golden mild sunshine instead. At once, the display windows peel off their woollen layers and don the lightest cotton dresses, for the Parisiennes dress not according to the climate but the season. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why Paris leads in fashion. No matter how cold it is, in spring they walk out in their new spring outfits.

Although the French are not over fond of foreigners they do pride themselves on the fact that Paris is always full of them. People go there, as if led by invisible threads, from all over the world and at once feel more at home than in their own country – they seldom hesitate to do things they would be too inhibited to do at home.

No matter in which direction a person's interest may lie, Paris affords them the opportunity to pursue, to fulfil it. She is brighter than the brightest polished stone, yet coarser than the craggiest rock. I consider myself very lucky to have lived, to have been alive, there.

We were able to partake of what she offered as soon as we became acquainted with the city and the language and, like a cherished wife, the more we knew her the more we loved her. We used to go to the movies. There were tickets for five francs, but also for one. We went dancing — to decent, well-run places where a band provided the music for the price of a lemonade. Such was the Eldorado on the Boulevarde Strassbourg or, another favourite, the Olympia, near the Opera.

There were good restaurants for every purse, where the food was tasty, always fresh, and, to us very important, the servings ample. We went swimming, on the Marne in summer, and to the Neptune, a heated pool, when it was cold. All of it was available for everybody's enjoyment. We pursued our happiness in every direction, each according to his inclination, partaking with abandon, splashing in the freedom to be able to do so, like a fly fallen into cream, but no matter what it was we started with, we always finished up, as if by agreement on the only thing we could agree upon, deep in heated argument.

We argued about all the ideologies, new and old, that we knew about and whether it was quicker to travel by bus or metro; the relative merits of our various methods of picking up girls; and about religion — interminably about religion and the role our being Jewish played in our lives.

In these arguments I found myself expressing views I never knew I held, but recognised them to be my profoundest convictions as soon as I uttered them. I realised that I was a liberal. I believed in freedom first of all. I hated limitations, I detested dogma and prejudice of every kind. The holier-than-thou attitude of those who were busily immersed in counting the number of angels on a pinhead; the number of hours that must elapse between a milk and a meat meal; the number of masses they attended; the number of prayers they recited, irritated me. I saw their efforts as not only splitting hairs but working splits and divisions among the remnants, the survivors of the war at a time when it was more important than ever to foster unity.

I loved the story of the two disputants who took their case to their spiritual leader, as was the custom, to have it settled. The learned *Rebbe* listened to the first man and when he had finished, such was the strength of the argument that the *Rebbe* said, "You are right." When the second man had set forth his case, the Rebbe was forced to say, "You are right," to him also, because of the flow of logic. The *Rebbe's* wife had been listening and after the men departed said to her husband: "You told this one, 'You are right', and you told the other one, completely opposed, also, 'You are right'. How can that be right?" The revered *Rebbe* stood in thought for a time and then answered her: "Do you know what, you are right, too!"

The conclusion I came to was that it was most important to fervently cultivate, to emphasise the positive aspects like brotherhood, tolerance and caring in order to overcome the hatred mongers who had been so successful so recently and who had not been conquered, only suppressed.

The relationship between Jews and Gentiles also occupied us, the horrors we had all been through forming the natural starting point. Like a favourite in a family, we had been hated by our brothers because of our 'chosen' status. Actually, what we were chosen for was, 'to be a light and a blessing to the nations' and not as favourites. However this might have been, we have undoubtedly produced the lights, like Freud and Einstein, and even the blessings, throughout our history – although some argue it – but somehow we had become scapegoats instead. Or as well.

Whatever was wrong anywhere on the globe we had been blamed for it, no matter how preposterous (like the plague in the Middle Ages); without benefit of defender, judge or jury, we had been charged, convicted and executed. En masse.

The principle of turning the other cheek is not a Jewish one; nevertheless, it seemed to me that we had been practising it. Perhaps we would have done better if we had turned and struck a few bullies instead. We could hardly have done worse.

Our G-d is good and just, not capricious and cruel. He knows and sees everything and is everywhere, yet He had stood by like the policemen in Budapest and allowed it all to happen. I was willing to grant that I knew little, that I didn't understand all, but what I did understand led me to believe that He hadn't seen, hadn't been there because He had turned His Face away.

At the beginning of 1947 Miki and I found a room that we could afford together, on the fifth floor of a hotel, accessible by a tightly wound, steep staircase, near Strassbourg Saint-Denis. We had notice to quit le Vesinet. Both of us had progressed in our work and we now earned more, so we could be independent.

We used to patronise a restaurant on the Boulevarde Strassbourg which was also favoured by many of our crowd. Had we all appeared together, we would have filled the place.

One night Miki, Tibor and I were sitting in a cafe after having dined together at the restaurant when a couple of men joined us. We drifted into a general conversation and before long one of the men put a packet of Camel cigarettes on the table and told us to help ourselves. Tibor was a watchmaker who had recently arrived in Paris and was very impressed with the generosity displayed by the stranger. He accepted the offer first and when we were all puffing away, the other man told us that they dealt in American cigarettes on the black market and boasted of how easy it was to make a few extra francs. They said that they were expecting a large delivery within three days, larger than they had ever had and could let us have a few cartons if we wished, why shouldn't we benefit too?

We agreed on the time, three days later, and the place, another cafe. The three of us turned up punctually with all the spare money we had and deputised Miki to act for us since he was the most imposing looking. We gave him the money, which he carefully counted and placed in a case brought especially to carry the cartons of cigarettes. His businesslike demeanour both surprised and reassured us. Our man arrived and went into the men's room, followed by a couple of other men, no doubt there on the same business, one with a case under his arm. A few minutes later the two came out and it was Miki's turn.

As soon as he went in the man asked him how much money he had and when Miki told him, they worked out between them how many cartons it represented. He handed over the money, the man turned and went out, supposedly to fetch the cigarettes; so Miki waited. He waited for quite a time before he realised that he would have to take up residence there if he was to wait until he saw the cigarettes we had bought. So ended our adventure in the black market!

Poor Miki got double the abuse he could deliver as Tibor and I shouted our anger at him at the top of our voices as if we thought he had lost his hearing along with our money and called him all kinds of a misbegotten son of an unknown father until we realised that one of us was no more to blame than the other, that either Tibor or I would have been duped, fleeced, in exactly the same way, and our anger turned to laughter at our naive stupidity. It took a little longer to occur to me, privately, what a lucky escape we had had, and how close we had come, had the deal been genuine, to joining the black marketeers.

In the following winter season I found an extra job. I had left M. Prager's and was working for a furrier with a different class of trade. M. Prager suggested, and I had agreed, that I should become experienced in the full range of skins, not only the cheaper ones that he specialised in, and become a proper tradesman. We agreed that he would call me whenever he had urgent work, or more then he could cope with, and it worked out well. I ran up to him after work and on Sundays, quite often just to visit, without being called, and limited my visits to Sunday only after I started my second, after-hours job.

After my day's work I went to another workroom where I cut lambskin jackets by the piece and earned, in four hours, as much as I had during the previous eight. The work was easy and I became quick at it. I had learnt my trade quite well and during the eight months of the year while the season lasted I earned good money. Work was scarce for the rest of the year and I used to make the most of the summer months to catch up on the swimming, dancing and movies I had missed during the season. I considered myself lucky to have landed in a good trade which allowed me to work at a time when the weather was unsuitable for outdoor activities and left me free for when it was. I made love a lot, too.

Viki wrote to me regularly. In every letter he mentioned what a shame it was that the two of us, the only ones left of our family, were living so far apart and that I should go home. I kept writing back that he should come and join me in Paris but he wouldn't hear of it, so, at length, I decided to visit him when the season was over. The ex-Hungarians had organised regular tours to Hungary, complete with train tickets and visa, and the fare was reasonable so I arranged to go. After all the travelling I had done this was the first trip I had planned and paid for with my own money – money I had earned.

I had a suit made, bought myself some shirts, ties, an overcoat, a few presents and, on the advice of the experienced tourists who had been before, a few bottles of perfume. We duly departed on 20 March. Our route led us through Switzerland and turned out to be very pleasant. When the train stopped in Zurich we got out and some bright spark among us discovered that the almost worthless French fifty centime coin fitted into the station cigarette and chocolate vending machines. We harvested the entire stock. I hate to think what curses the owner must have wished on us when he discovered his loss. It took two days to reach Budapest. I found a hotel and could hardly wait to unpack so that I could get out into the city. I walked around the familiar streets with eager interest but almost immediately found myself feeling lonely and a stranger. I looked up some old acquaintances but all they could talk about was the war and how it had been for them; who fell victim and where; who had returned from deportation and who had not. It hurt me dreadfully and I quickly realised that this was not my home, perhaps it never had been.

On my last night I drifted back to the hotel and got into conversation with a prostitute who was sitting in the lobby and I happened to mention that I had some bananas in my case.

"Where did you get bananas?" she asked me with interest, "you can't buy them here!"

I told her a little about myself and we ended up spending the night together — for the bananas. Her name was Magdi. I later came to the conclusion that she was the only one of all the people I had met in the capital with whom I had had a pleasant encounter.

The city was in the throes of being cleaned, spruced up and decorated in honour of the impending visit of Yugoslavia's Marshal Tito. When, some weeks later, he fell out with the

Communist clique, I derived particular pleasure, because of having witnessed the fervour of the preparations and heard the paeans of praise, when I read the unimaginative and repetitious but nevertheless vituperative attack on him when he was called a capitalist tool and a reactionary. He was thrown out of the gang and formally informed that he was no longer welcome to play in Stalin's yard – there was even a threat for a while that Russia would invade Yugoslavia.

On the third morning I boarded the train after having purchased the ticket to Nyircsaholy from some of the profits of the successful sale of the perfumes I had brought. My arrival was a most depressing experience. My brother waited at the station and took me home to the house where I was born and brought up, where I spent my childhood in the midst of my family, where I had belonged, been happy. It was the same house, with the same furniture, even the old dishes were there, all was as it used to be, but to me it was a morgue.

As soon as we entered, the question, "How can you live here?" burst out of me. I kept repeating it, although I didn't really expect an answer – there wasn't one. Even the shop was as it had been and Viki was running it as best he could and making his living out of it.

The Communists had taken over the government and were discouraging private enterprise by levying heavy taxes, he had had more than his year's turnover levied on him, he told me. He didn't know how he was going to pay it.

"You went off to your forced labour unit and never wrote a single line," I reproached him as soon as the first excitement of arrival was over.

"I couldn't write," he exclaimed in an injured tone. "Within a week of leaving you I was already at the front, widening the roads for the army trucks to be able to pass each other. It was very hard work, lucky I only had to do it for a few days. You don't know how it is if you have never been on the front. The noise is terrible, but one morning it seemed to come from all around so Simi and I decided to hide in the cornfields when the order came to retreat. You remember Simi, he and Béla went to Palestine last year. They are probably sitting in Cyprus until they can get into our country, but it won't be long now. Anyway, Simi said we must be surrounded and so it was. We lay in the corn all day and all night and in the morning all the cannonade was coming from behind so we knew it was safe to come out. A Russian truck came by and picked us up. They took us to the command post and an officer interrogated us but we had very little to tell, so he turned us loose. We finished up in Bucharest, it took us about a month to get there and we waited until the news came that the Russians had liberated this part. We were among the first to come home."

I did remember Simi, small and quick and Viki's friend practically since infancy, and if he was now sitting in Cyprus, then he had been taken there, together with other Jews who were trying to get into Palestine against the wishes of the Arabs and the British, by British warships constantly patrolling the Mediterranean.

I had to tell Viki all about what had happened to me. When I came to the part where I had decided not to jump on to the tram, he told me off.

"I knew you were not fit to be left on your own. You always talked big, with your being 'three steps ahead of them', and see what happened? You could have perished! You'll do much better to stay here with me."

We talked about the shop and his prospects of paying the tax and about his forthcoming wedding to a girl from Transylvania and how he hoped to improve his circumstances once he had a partner — his wife, since I was unwilling — to help him. Hedi, his bride, was a jolly, capable girl who, with her family, had fled the Hungarian retaking of Transylvania, and its atrocities. They had escaped to Russia where they had been interned in Siberia for illegally crossing the border, and from where she had only recently arrived.

We chatted about nonsense so as not to speak of what was uppermost in our minds.

Béla, who was most likely fretting in Cyprus, I knew to have been in the same unit as Andor.

"You know that Béla was with Andor," Viki said, almost as I thought it. "They had been taken to Dachau. Andor seemed to have borne it harder, Béla said, because he had had nothing to spare to begin with. He was always so thin and his large frame had no substance left on it, he had walked bent over as if it couldn't support him any more. He had just closed his eyes forever." I didn't need to hear the details, I had seen so many die like that.

The neighbours came in to greet me but I could hardly see them for the tears which kept welling in my eyes. Of the hundred or so Jews about ten had returned and were starting their lives over again. Ella was one of them.

"We were all taken to the ghetto at the beginning of April," she told me. "It was set up in the centre of town (Mátészalka). Several thousand people from the district around, and some even from the uplands were concentrated there. The Christians had been told to leave their homes and the few blocks designated for the Jews were empty before the walls enclosing it were raised to permit neither access nor egress.

"Whatever we could carry we were allowed to take with us. Nobody, except those who had the forethought to pack some food, had anything to eat. The crowding was incredible, straw was put down wall to wall for the families to sleep on, the furniture left in the houses was carried outside out of the way, chopped up and used to fuel the open fires where people cooked potatoes or beans, whatever they had brought. There was nothing else, nor the possibility of acquiring anything, not by buying nor any other way."

Ella's tears flowed unchecked as she told of the babies alternately screaming and sucking their mothers' dry breasts and of the young children's staring eyes filmed over with lassitude when the wafting cooking odours reawakened their hunger.

"It was dreadful if you didn't have food and it was terrible if you had, for it was impossible to share with all who were without and equally impossible to derive benefit from food eaten in the sight of the starving – there was no place to hide. There was never any respite from the loud and prolonged crying of the many children. You couldn't get away from it."

It took fifty days, from Easter to Pentecost in 1944 to collect all the Jews from the district's townships, villages and farms, to organise and assemble the hundred wagons with engines into which they finally crammed the ten thousand or so suffering souls while the Russians already swarmed on Hungarian soil.

The brutal, cruel gendarmes, with their many-hued cockerel feathers curling over their helmets, were entrusted with guarding the captives, the necessity of extra care not to allow any to escape was especially impressed upon them with the explanation that they were guarding locals who knew their way about and might be expected to melt into the fields and copses if they got away.

I listened to Ella's recital with inexpressible sorrow boiling over into furious anger when I remembered that the captives and the captors had known each other all their lives; had gone to school together, had shopped in each other's stores, served side by side in the trenches of the First World War where my uncle died a hero's death defending his country and my father spent four years of his life. How proudly my grandfather had worn his decorations, won for bravery and service in the cavalry!

She had no need to describe the wagons and the journey, because although we had had no children with us I could picture a mother holding on to her hungry child, whom she couldn't feed or even give a drink of water to, until it died, and even after it had died, until the doors were opened, because there was no place to put the body. As well, there was no snow to gobble down to ease aching, parched throats in the heat of early June. The horrible hell I had suffered paled in comparison.

They had been taken to Auschwitz. As soon as they got out of the wagons the selection took place, the able-bodied between the ages of fifteen and fifty on one side, the rest on the other. Ella had been transferred to Ravensbrück together with Anna and Rozsi. Up to about a month before liberation they were managing, but slowly poor Rozsi started to fail. When she was no longer able to walk the guard took her away. Anna ran to join her, not only to obey mother's instructions to support each other, stick together, but because it was also her own wish. I knew exactly how she must have felt, I was sure I would have done the same, having no desire to survive alone. So they were both killed.

Our parents had not even been given a chance to try to survive, they had been selected for death in the gas chamber, where they were sent with a piece of soap in their hands, as if to a shower, where they were murdered.

All I continued asking was, "What are you doing here? How can you stay here? Where do you find life here?" I found only death.

I told Viki that I intended to leave right after his wedding.

"Stay at least as long as your visa will permit," he suggested.

"I wouldn't stay here, where the neighbours allowed law-abiding inhabitants to be dragged away to some unheard of place to be starved, tortured and killed, not if you gift-wrapped the filthy stinking hole and handed it to me on a salver — I would rather go anywhere. I'll go to Budapest and from there to

Paris by the first train I can catch," I told him.

"You and your Paris. What are you boasting about your tenth-rate hotel room – no doubt a tiny hole where you rot by yourself and where you will be found a week after your death by the landlord, seeking not you but his money, because you don't know your neighbours to ask for a bit of help should you need it and where you work your guts out in some smelly cellar from morning till night so you can spend your money and your strength on some diseased whore."

We argued on while our tears stung our eyes, ready to brim over at the least relaxation of control. After a miserable week I left my village for the last time.

I returned to Budapest, where I had eleven days to wait before my train was due to leave for Paris — I couldn't change the date. I loitered about the streets and went to stay at the same hotel as before. I walked to the station every day to make sure that the carriages of the special train that had brought us from Paris were still there, waiting to take me back again. Every now and then I renewed my acquaintance with Magdi, the little street girl, with whom I had made love for a few bananas.

When the time came to board the train for the return journey I went to the station two hours early. By the time I settled into my seat my mood had changed and when we crossed the border I had shed most of my gloom. As we approached Paris I craned my neck to catch a glimpse of the Eiffel Tower from the train window, like any kid. I felt at home again.

My visit home had been a big mistake for two reasons: I was disappointed in my reunion with Viki — I found it hard to understand why, but it had lacked depth of feeling and understanding between us and turned out to be an anticlimax. He had started once more where our parents had been forced to leave off, it seemed to me like a person planting a pieces of kindling and expecting it to bloom again in its former rich foliage, providing cool shade, whereas it was nothing but withered wood. The few others who had returned had fallen into the same reverie and failed to see the graves, amongst which it was impossible to live without weeping. I couldn't make him see it.

The second reason was financial. The money I had saved for the trip was all spent and when I reported back to work my boss informed me that in his opinion I could wait until the season started, since I could afford to go tripping around, and in the meantime there was no work for me. I was just starting to get desperate when I remembered that I had some holiday pay due to me. When the amount was added up I realised that my boss must have been confused because he miscalculated and I received considerably more than he owed. To my empty pocket it seemed a tidy sum and it was with an easy heart that I descended the stairs to the street.

I didn't walk far before I met Tibor and another friend, Paul, who told me, after I unloaded my tale, that they also were out of work. Tibor said he would dearly like to go down to Besançon, about four hundred kilometres from Paris, near the Swiss border, where there was a watch factory. He was sure they would get work, but they had been down to the station and the fare was much more than they could raise, in fact they had no money at all. Paul then remembered my windfall and we quickly agreed to travel down, all three of us, as my money was just enough for the three fares. I have no idea what I imagined Paul and I were going to do there but we proceeded to the station and bought the tickets forthwith.

The journey lasted all night because there was no direct line from Paris and we had to change at Dijon. By the time we arrived we had very little money left, so we established ourselves at a really cheap hotel, explaining to the hotel keeper that we had come to take up jobs but would be paid only at the end of the week, when we would be able to pay him.

Tibor did indeed get a job, but it was to start the following Monday and he would be paid three weeks hence, as the firm paid its workers fortnightly. Paul had no trade. He found a job helping a stall-holder at the market, once a week. I, for my part, looked up the only furrier in town without delay. He was glad to see me and would give me work with pleasure, when the season got going, in a few months' time.

We found Besançon to be a lovely country town, with open fields and everything else a man could wish for, except jobs. Luckily, the cherry season was at its height and there was no lack of large, shady cherry trees bearing the finest, crunchy, ripe cherries. There was a sweet, secluded creek flowing nearby as well.

In order not to be seen when we left the room – we had yet to pay a centime for it – we used to get up and leave early. We made our way to the cherry trees where we stuffed ourselves all day, with interruptions for swimming and roaming the flower-scented fields. Had it not been for our urgent need for money we could have had a glorious, carefree time there, of the kind we used to dream about during the long hours of tedious work in the winter gloom. We all got a slight case of the runs, but, knowing the cause – an exclusive diet of cherries – we didn't worry, nor take it seriously. The following Monday, when Tibor started work, Paul and I were left to continue this idyllic existence. On Friday, market day, I too went to the market on the offchance of finding work and managed to earn a few franks here and there, but that was all. In the evening we strolled around town.

There was a restaurant where every table was set with a large basket piled high with bread, neatly sliced, as well as a pot of mustard. We seated ourselves and ate up the bread, liberally spread with mustard, as quickly, and yet with as much nonchalance, as we could. When the waitress brought the menu we studied it with all the attention of the gourmet and then informed her with regret that there was nothing there we fancied and walked out. She was onto us right away but let us repeat the performance until her boss noticed and banned us from the premises.

I asked her what time she finished work and when she told me I whispered, before our exit, that I would wait for her. When I went back she invited me to her place next door. Her name was Jacqueline and she had two children but no husband. She took food home every night for her children and she invited me to share it with them. I stayed the night.

The restaurant was not open during the day and I spent a lot of time with her at her place, which consisted of one room and kitchen. It wasn't long before she asked me to move in with her but I was reluctant to desert the other two, nor did I like the idea of accepting, on a regular basis, the food intended for her children. I was forced by circumstances to do so sometimes – on occasion the other two had to be included – and I felt it keenly. I was afraid the scene where three hungry men would sit down to share what was intended for two children would be repeated. The place was not very inviting, the building was neglected and the furniture was also poor. The bed squeaked to such an extent that when we made love it could be heard out in the corridor, and even in the street, through the window.

She, too, was a delight in bed, as I had come to conclude only the French women could be, and just as generous. She wouldn't have minded if I had stayed with her for good. It bothered her, for the children's sake, that they had no father. Quite simply, she loved men. The fact that she was landed with two children was part of the package deal. She was just twenty. Even though both my morale and finances were at a low because I had no work (only the unemployed understand truly the blow to the ego) I was as ready as ever, perhaps even more so, to try and even the balance by taking a bonus from life where it was available. Nevertheless, I didn't see how I could take on a wife and a ready made family of two children while still under eighteen.

The three of us realised that we had little chance of earning enough money to live on let alone pay our fares back to Paris, which, in spite of the loveliness of the place and the virtual holiday we were having, seemed imperative. In Paris we would still have a better chance of finding employment and, certainly, we had hordes of friends upon whom we could legitimately sponge until conditions improved. We borrowed from each other all the time. To us, a friend was a friend as well as family and we relied on each other to an extent that I thought unequalled until I read about Australian mateship.

Tibor had still not received any wages and Paul the market assistant spent his as soon as he got it, in a most improvidential and, I thought, selfish manner, saying that in any case it would not stretch to three. After I had spent everything I had for the three of us, this failed to impress me as a valid argument but there was nothing I could do about it. By the middle of the second week Tibor was forced to ask for, and received, an advance on his salary so that when payday came around there was very little of it left. Deep down I was not desperate but I had to admit that our situation looked bleak, with no expectations of improvement. However, the cherries still ripened on the bough.

By the end of our third week there was still no prospect of a solution to our financial problems, nor did a possibility of returning to Paris appear at all likely. My worst fear was that I would fall into accepting Jacqueline's offer to stay with her, out of sheer necessity mixed with inertia, the way I had accepted her food — more often lately. I was afraid I would stumble into marriage with a good hearted little woman who would go to bed with all comers out of an abundance of love and the generosity of her heart and, for a dowry, gain two children.

I wrote to M. Prager and asked for a loan. He sent me a thousand francs by return mail. I told Tibor and Paul that night, when I was on my way to the station, and we agreed that it would give them a better chance, too, once they were rid of me, and that they would probably manage to come to Paris out of Tibor's next pay. Jacqueline let the tears drop from her eyes unheeded as she wished me good luck. I boarded a train once again and arrived in Paris next morning. On arrival I deposited my luggage at the station and went to the furriers' quarter to look for a job. I received many promises.

When I judged Miki to be at home, around six, I went to his place. He was not in. I waited, resting my muscles, weary after the all-night journey and all day's traipsing, sat on the stairs and contemplated my situation.

Since I had arrived more than three years before, Paris had been my home and I could not imagine living anywhere else, yet my trips to Budapest and Besançon had somehow shaken my complacency and faith in the rightness of my life as it was. I had learnt the language well and acquired a trade which I hoped would provide my livelihood in all circumstances and yet, here I was, forced to wait for a friend to share his bed with me and lend me money to tide me over until my first pay. It was a depressing picture and I cursed myself for a reckless idiot, that I had allowed myself to be influenced, first by my brother and later by friends, until I, who had survived the camp and should have known better, was again back where I had been three years before. I should have realised that I was alone and couldn't afford to act irresponsibly. In mitigation I admitted the obligation I had felt to see my brother, to clear my guilt because I lived so far from him, but wondered whether the trip should have been postponed.

The first task on my agenda for the next morning, I decided, would be to find a job — any job — and the next, to consult with that branch of the O.S.E. to which I belonged. They had repeatedly assured us that they would be pleased to help in any way they could even though we no longer lived in the home.

I heard Miki's slow steps on the stairs just as I came to the decision to ask about the possibility of emigrating to a country where the war had not left such damage behind, where one didn't have to cope with cantering inflation if not yet galloping — where the wages were not always rising but still falling behind the prices. Somewhere, where there were easier circumstances, perhaps better opportunities.

Of course I could stay with Miki, as long as I needed to, and he left me money in the morning, before he departed for work.

I started off at once on my quest for a job and found one soon, on poor wages. No matter, the main thing was to have work. I visited M. Prager and suggested that I work off the thousand francs he had sent me; I would have time since my job was not to start until the following Monday. He agreed.

True to my plan, I also went to the O.S.E. office to inquire about emigration. I chose Canada for its cold climate, where I thought a furrier would have better scope. They took my particulars and helped me to fill out the application. I learnt that I could expect an answer within four weeks. When it came I rushed to the *O.S.E.* office, only to be told that Canada had declined but that I could go to Australia.

I knew nothing about Australia. The lady behind the desk, ever helpful, showed me on the globe where it was, down there, on the other side of the world. She explained that there were two big cities: Sydney, with one and a half million people and Melbourne with one million, that it would take six weeks on board ship to get there, and that the climate was hot.

"In that case," I hastened to express my fears, "they will have no use for furriers."

"Don't worry, you are young and can learn another trade if it becomes necessary," she said, dismissing the problem as unimportant.

The six weeks' trip aboard ship, so far away from complicated, troubled Europe, attracted me the most so I announced, on the spot, that I would go to Australia, signed the application form and left the office well content and with my head full of the most extravagant fantasies.

My boss's head, on the other hand, was teeming with other ideas, mostly concerned with justifying my low wages. He was formulating and voicing great plans for my future with his firm, and his high hopes of my becoming familiar with all aspects of the work by the time the full season with all its pressure of urgent work should arrive. He encouraged me to greater efforts with assurances that he would keep me on in summer, after the end of the season, as well. The tower of the Gare de Lyon, the station of my departure to be, was visible from where I stood at my bench and I was dandled on the deep swells of the Indian Ocean somewhere, in imagination, while he was holding forth and advising me not to mind how little I was making at the moment, I should concentrate on improving myself and I would make plenty of money in the future.

Of course I was careful to mention nothing of my plans to him as he may have sacked me and I needed all the money I could make. The whole concept of the trip had come on me so suddenly that, in spite of my fantasies, it was nebulous in the extreme. Only at that age could I have made such a momentous decision in such haste, to plan on leaving just when the city, the language, the whole way of life had become familiar. The magnet of adventure was stronger than the fear of the unknown and I hadn't hesitated.

I had no peace until I had paid my debts. Jacqueline, my little maid of Besançon, was first. I sent her parcels with clothes for the children and oddments for herself on three separate occasions before my conscience was cleared, and I pictured with satisfaction the surprise and pleasure she would have enjoyed every time she received one.

Two weeks after my first interview I was called to the Australian Consulate for a medical examination. Luckily, I was found to be quite healthy but still had to have the various injections against yellow fever, cholera and the like, which travellers of those days had to undergo. Every time I was due for one of these I had to take time off work, until my boss could no longer contain his curiosity and asked where I was going so often.

"To see my doctor," I told him.

"What's wrong with you?" he wanted to know. Before I realised what I was saying I blurted out that I was getting an anti-cholera injection.

"Do you have cholera?" he asked me in panic, retreating to put as much distance between us as the workroom permitted. To allay his fears, not to mention his suspicion of the truth – of which he had none – I had no end of a job to make up a reason on the spur of the moment, about having had it after camp and needing a booster.

Soon, I had notification that I was due to board the train which would take me to Marseilles on 30 August, there to embark on an Italian ship, the Napoli, which would take me to Australia. During my visits to the various offices to get the documents together I made the acquaintance of other boys also on their way there.

I told M. Prager all about my projected trip. Both he and his wife were sure of my future happiness there and encouraged me in my resolve.

There was to be none of the delay I had both feared and hoped – hoped, in order to collect a little emergency fund. In the event, I hoped there would be no emergency, for there was certainly no fund. The best I could expect was to hold on to my job until the last possible moment. This was terribly difficult as I could not prevent my mind dwelling on the trip and my head floating off among the clouds, already on its way south, while my boss babbled on about what a tradesman he was making out of me and sketching out the brilliant future I was to have with him. Many times I was on the verge of telling him that in yet another ten, or nine, or however many days, I would be off and the future as depicted by him had no relation to mine, but I managed to hold my tongue. The time somehow passed and on the last day, when I finally told him that I would be leaving for Australia on the morrow and would he please make up my wages and pay me, I could not enjoy his surprise as I had anticipated because he nearly choked on his spluttered exclamations. As soon as we restored him to normal and he managed to bring himself to believe and accept the ruin of his plans for me, he gave me my money and we parted without animosity. I used the money to pay the last of my debts and buy food for the train.

I spent my last night walking about Paris because I couldn't sleep. I walked the Grand Boulevarde towards the Opera, deep in thought about leaving Paris, the beloved of my existence, who loved me in return and had opened her soul to me, and whom I was faithlessly deserting. The scene of my love-adventures, where so many smiles had beamed in my direction; leaving the many friends, like Miki, who relied on me in need and upon whom I had been able to rely; the feeling I had found there for the first time, of equality and freedom, leaving it for uncertainty, for which I was making ready with much excitement and ado. I kept walking to the Place de la Concorde all the way down Rue de Rivoli to the Chatelet, on to the Bastille and back on the Grande Boulevarde through Republique to Strassbourg St Denis, being torn by the gravest doubts, the first, since it had occurred to me to go. I thought I should tear up the papers and stay – then again the excitement of the adventure gripped me and I comforted myself with a solemn promise to come back – soon, if Australia and I should not suit, for long and frequent visits if we did. Even though I was leaving, it didn't mean forever.

It was in a quieter and more hopeful frame of mind that I returned, about three in the morning, to my garret room on the sixth floor of the cheapest hotel I could find upon my return from Besançon, and which I had inhabited since. As I crept quietly in, trying not to disturb the rest of the hotel population, I saw three mice having a feast on the food I had bought for my journey. I pulled off my shoe and smashed it down on the nearest one, spattering gore all over the remaining food and my one other shirt. I sat down on the edge of the iron-frame bed and gazed at the tiny form I had killed in sudden temper, with sincere regret. I shouldn't have minded sharing with the hungry little creature, no doubt busy about his affairs just like me, and with just as much right. I lay down and watched battalions of mice romping over ships in floods of waves and lots of blood, not knowing whether I was awake or asleep.

When I got up to get ready and put my belongings in my small case the day was just beginning and it was still too early, so I started off on foot to the station. It was lovely to walk along the freshly washed, summer morning streets which I had almost to myself. The trip organiser was already at the station when I arrived. He gave me my ticket and, to my utter astonishment, six thousand francs as well, spending money — a thoughtful extra from the Australian Jewish Welfare Society, who paid for my fare.

The Pragers were another surprise. They came to say good-bye and brought a parcel of food for the journey! I promised to write. Miki also turned up to farewell me and I gave him my remaining ration cards, luckily remembered at the last minute, after several repeated assurances of continued correspondence. I wrote, too, but the hairy gorilla never replied. I heard later that he had emigrated to Venezuela. I tried not to get over emotional, not even when Mme Prager embraced and kissed me and we began our journey to the unknown – to Australia.

It was pleasant under the bright sun and as we proceeded southwards it became warmer. The train sped among sown fields of every hue rich with the ripening produce. Being an experienced traveller didn't blunt my excitement. In spite of the strain I felt in my neck from continually turning to gaze out of the window I could not look away. I wanted to see — to see and remember.

All day we travelled and I made the acquaintance of some boys who had been taken from camp to Switzerland and were now also on their way to Australia, and renewed my friendship with some whom I had first met in the course of getting the documentation ready.

At Marseilles a bus was waiting to take us to the ship but when we got there only the dark water was visible lapping the docks and, after a long wait, the ship arrived pulled by a little motor tug. I was very grateful that we were allowed on board as soon as it was made fast, and taken down into a large area strewn with double bunks. We were each given one and since I had not slept the previous night, but had exhausted myself with doubts and spent the day in high excitement instead of sleeping like the wise ones, I fell into mine and was asleep at once.

Zoltán & friends at a picnic on the Marne near Paris.

Zoltán & The Pragers.

With Dental Technician friends at an outing

6. VOYAGE TO A NEW LAND

When I woke I could feel vibrations from the engine and the movement of the ship. I announced the fact loud enough for the entire huge hall to hear, sure of the importance of my news, never thinking that those who slept couldn't hear and those who didn't sleep already knew. I dashed up on deck as fast as I could to see where we might be.

There was water all around but in the far distance land could be seen. The sun was just rising out of the Mediterranean! The whole scene was exhilarating. The very idea of my standing on deck, floating on water, moving on a globe with Australia down on the other side, her shore washed, perhaps next day, by the wave then passing gently under me, connected me already and I saw myself in fantasy, as I had in a movie once, driving an open coupe on that shore, in the sunrise, a beautiful blonde companion beside me, her hair whipped by the wind.

Delicious aromas of coffee and freshly baking bread sent me in search of breakfast, which I ate with gusto when I found the dining room – hot white bread-rolls with butter and jam and plenty of good, Italian coffee.

In the meantime the sun rose higher and it became very warm. In the hall where we slept it was unbearably hot but even this failed to dampen my wonder and my joy in the ship, that people were capable of building such a thing, which carried more than a thousand passengers, besides crew, had its own bakery, kitchen and even a swimming pool, constructed out of watertight canvas lining one of the holds, pumped full of sea-water. When the hold was again needed, in port, the water was pumped out. We made full use of the pool, we spent many enjoyable hours in and out of it in the heat.

On the Napoli spaghetti was served in some form every lunch and dinner and we had wine with our meals. Our first stop was Naples, the ship's home port. Much to my regret we had missed out on seeing Marseilles but we were able to make up for it in Naples.

I saw the mark of poverty on every face. A worker I watched clambered all over the roof of a building as he repaired it. When lunchtime came he took out his chunk of bread and munched it right there, sitting on the roof. The place was, nevertheless, full of bustling life and gaiety with Mount Vesuvius always visible in the background, smoke hovering about it like an old watchman puffing on his pipe. Clotheslines were strung from building to building across the narrow alleys, forever hung with drying laundry, like some exotic rigging with its many coloured sails.

Wherever we went we seemed to drag a comet's tail of little boys, offering the charms of their sisters in shrill soprano voices.

I saw more poverty and more children in Naples than I had ever seen before and marvelled how the two went together, as in my village. It seemed to me that it would have been more reasonable to hasten slowly with producing children, but perhaps reason had little to do with it. I realised with a certain shock that other people besides me had no money. Here I saw a city full of them, and it appeared as if they took it as a matter of course. I was once again without money, for I fell victim to my great weakness and the blandishments of one of the little boys and blew my six thousand francs on a sweet little *Neapolitaine* in the corner of the single room that comprised the total of the family's apartment, separated off for modesty's sake by an old blanket hung on a string. On the other side her mother was busily ironing the laundry she had just brought in off the lines above the street, through the window. I arrived back on board with empty pockets.

Two tugs were connected to the ship and I marvelled to see them push and pull us into position like ants manoeuvring a dead beetle, until the ship could proceed with dignity, under her own power. The tugs were cast off and we again had the open sea before us. I looked back at the watchman's puffs of smoke, for a long time visible in the background, and at the water, an incredibly beautiful opalescent blue, the colour of heaven for sure, dotted about with orange peel, orange side up, like some new breed of flower on the ocean's fields.

The southern shore of the Mediterranean was visible – I actually beheld Africa, although only from afar!

The weather grew hotter and the swimming pool was set up again. This turned the heat into a source of pleasure while we were in the water and for a few seconds afterwards. I got into conversation with many of my fellow passengers, an easy matter when we met, within the confines of the ship, day after day. Many Italians had come on board at Naples and I was able to converse with them in French. My scraps of German and Yiddish also came into use and there seemed no limit to the number of nationalities with whom I could communicate.

Of course the same question was on every lip, the same anxiety in every mind: what was it like in the strange and, to us, unknown country we were heading for and what sort of fate awaited us there. No one I spoke to was better informed than I, who knew next to nothing. Of our hopes of greater opportunity, of having left behind the traces of war, food coupons, of our chances of being touched by the next war, we didn't speak much – as if, like a birthday wish before blowing out the candles, if we spoke about it, it would not come true. There were many English migrants on board as well, who probably were better informed, but with these my many languages knew their limit at last.

Much sooner than I would have thought possible we arrived at Port Said, but, for reasons undivulged, we were not allowed to go ashore. This didn't deter the enterprising local merchants, an army of whom soon surrounded our ship, having come out in little boats laden with an incredible variety of tourist ware, such as shoes, jewellery, toy camels with one hump or two, bags of every size made of tooled leather and every kind of memento you cared to waste your money on. They threw up a ball of string attached to a tremendously long rope with a basket tied to it and conducted their business by shouting at the tops of their voices in a perfect Babel of languages quite impossible for anyone to understand. For the first time in my life I was glad I had no money, for the buying fever was infectious. Without doubt, I too would have landed in Australia with some utterly useless article. The trading was a unique experience to watch, especially as a violent quarrel loaded with what must have been curses and obviously rude gestures seemed to be mandatory at the conclusion of each transaction. Both the merchant and the customer felt cheated, which, given the conditions, bargaining, distance, noise and no common language, was to be expected.

Before we left, five hundred bags of onions were loaded on board, on to the top deck, perhaps because there was no room in the hold, or, since they were to be unloaded at the next port of call, Colombo, perhaps it was not considered worth while stashing them, or for some other reason; but there those onions sat in the blazing sun busily exuding an aroma peculiar to themselves. The subject of whether the heat was worse or the onion smell, and whether the smell enjoyed best conditions for its full fruition when the air was still or when the ship's movement wafted it gently on the currents, gave many an opportunity for eloquence, of which, sadly, none of us took advantage, and expressions of “phew” and “hell, what a stink”, were mostly to be heard. However, we made up in frequency and vehemence what we lacked in quality and soon decided the real reason for their being on deck was that, had they been in the hold they would have blown up the ship.

We soon left the crowd of little boats to make their way back to Port Said and entered the Suez Canal. This is a tremendous construction and very impressive, sitting as it does in the midst of a desert where the conscientious wind never travels empty but transports its portion of sand with every puff. The traffic on the canal proceeded in only one direction at any one time, ships on their way in the opposite direction had to wait in little bays until the passage was clear for them, rather like a railway siding.

Thousands of workers were busy all along the length of the canal, engaged in their futile task of carrying bucketsful of sand away from the edge, up the bank and a hundred metres further, where they tipped it out and returned for more. They certainly had job security, if not job satisfaction.

The temperature hovered between forty and forty-five degrees. Any passing puff of breeze came to us a dragon's breath, laden with sand and rotting onion. Somebody mentioned that it must have been hotter in August. Had it been a little cooler just then, I would have roused myself and disagreed.

Israel, the dream of the Jews for so long, had become a reality a few months before; it lay just over the eastern horizon but I was passing it by. I felt like a deserter.

Soon, the passengers divided into little groups and social cliques. I became friendly with a couple of older ladies. One, Bella, was travelling with her sixteen-year-old daughter, and the other, Elizabeth, was going to join her brother and sister and their families, already settled in Melbourne. She had several good novels which she lent me and I enjoyed reading a volume of François Villon, in Hungarian, from which we often quoted to each other. She told me her niece also worked in the fur trade and her nephew was an apprentice motor mechanic. She said they had written her that jobs were easy to get but accommodation was scarce and expensive. Naturally I was interested in every detail. She suggested that she would introduce us when we arrived in Melbourne because they were about my age. She was sure they would come to the ship to meet her. I agreed.

There was a kiosk on board where cigarettes sweets and soft drinks could be bought – of no interest to me in my penniless condition.

Apart from the heat, to which we were becoming accustomed, and the onions, to which we were not, it was pleasant, for the sea was calm, the food plentiful and good. Many had piano-accordions which they played with vigour and endurance to undemanding and appreciative audiences, who knew every tune. Dances were organised to the music, after sunset, when the air was cool. In the area where we slept, however, the air never seemed to cool, on the contrary, it was further heated by our sweaty bodies.

We celebrated the Jewish New Year with a very moving service, organised by the older men, also *Yom Kippur*, for which the captain had a special break-the-fast meal laid on.

There was no dock for us to tie up to in Colombo, capital of Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was then known, so we were conveyed ashore in little boats. The city was ancient, full of heavily carved, beautiful temples and buildings with wing-like roofs. It was very very hot. The policemen wore what looked like skirts and walked barefoot and the women were bedecked in gorgeous, coloured saris, each with what I mistook to be a red beauty spot on their foreheads. Nor was I far wrong for it certainly enhanced their beauty, but later I found it had a religious significance. The men did not feel in need of decoration and were simply dressed in gleaming white shirts. All the food was highly spiced with chilli and every variety of pepper: white, black, red and cayenne; which made me wonder whether they thought to alleviate the external heat with the internal, or whether the latter added to the former.

After two days' stay we left Colombo without the onions, which had been unloaded there accompanied, Glory Be, by its entire complement of smells. After having endured it for fourteen days it was sheer heaven to be without its ever irritating presence.

Our next port of call would be on Australian soil – Fremantle. For the first time we experienced slightly rougher seas and many succumbed to seasickness. I must have been born on a wave for I never suffered one moment's qualm, right through the voyage. As we neared Australia the heat began to abate and we had frequent rain squalls – typical October weather, we were told. I noted with surprise that we had already been on board a month, the time passed so quickly, to me full of interest and enjoyment. I have loved shipboard travel ever since and cannot imagine anything better.

Day by day the waves became bigger and threw our huge ship about as if it were a splinter on top of the water. Dishes could be heard to crash as they toppled from their places. It must have been the third or fourth day out of Naples when I had noticed an elderly Italian lady dressed all in black, including the kerchief over her head, seated on a little bench on deck. No matter what time of day, what part of sea or ocean or in port, there she continued to sit, mumbling what I took to be prayers. In these tumbling seas I found an echo of her awe within myself, only differing in my way of expressing it. Later, when the Indian Ocean showed us that it was no overgrown lake, I noticed a tiny rivulet making its way down the tilt of the deck, originating from under her, and realised just how frightened the poor soul must have been to glue herself to her bench, only her lips moving with increased tempo.

The swimming pool was emptied, its canvas walls rolled up and put away. Every day it got colder – for longer. Rain was a nightly feature. By the time we neared Fremantle I knew exactly how the old lady felt, for with every wave tilting the ship further I was convinced that it would roll over completely, that it had gone too far to possibly recover. I wondered how my Italian mates could continue the game they played without interval, possibly in relays, from dawn to dawn — that they would continue it, I had no doubt, even under water — and which entailed saying one number but showing another with the fingers. The intricacies of the game still elude me, but the melodious voices calling out "*Tre, cinque, tutto*", or whatever, resounded in my ear going to bed and waking up, right through the voyage.

Representatives from the Western Australian branch of the Jewish Welfare Society awaited the twenty or so of us when we docked at Fremantle. They, and their Victorian and New South Wales counterparts, had made themselves responsible for us to the Australian Government, guaranteeing that we would not become a burden on the Commonwealth and thereby securing permission for us to immigrate. They took us into Perth by bus, a journey that seemed longer than the forty minutes or so that it took going and much shorter returning.

This was no Naples, nor Colombo. There was no evidence of war or poverty, it was an open, clean city with a wide sky over it, unobscured by tall buildings and full of shops with women's dresses that were too long and men's jackets too short.

In the suburbs, lovely cottages could be seen in rows, set back from the wide grassed footpaths, without fences so that the whole street looked like one enormous lawn broken only by the twin tracks of the concrete or stone driveways, like so many equation signs, leading to each house. The bushes dotted about were just beginning to flower in the spring sunshine, and letter boxes – like storks standing guard on one leg – were placed on the boundary line for the postman's convenience. The setting sun shone with a mellow glow on the brick walls, unpainted and unrendered as if proud of their primitiveness, and with a rich sheen on the wild greens of the tropical foliage. A rare pedestrian walked along, only cars flitted by me, on the wrong side of the street, as did our bus. We drove past a river, silver in the depths of high banks almost invisible because of the profusion of golden flower-covered bushes, like a silver scarf edged with gold. All of us on the bus agreed that if the rest of Australia was even remotely like Perth we were lucky indeed and had chosen well. We had ventured to a completely new world and it had turned out lovely.

The bus stopped in front of a small restaurant where our hosts treated us to dinner, our first Australian meal. I noticed straight away the big difference, for there sat a huge piece of steak that nearly covered the plate and hardly left room for the vegetables, whereas in Europe one gets a tiny portion of meat and it's the vegetables that cover the plate. We all tried our language skills on the members of the reception committee, with very little success, but we did understand that they were trying to convince us to stay in Perth. They argued that the living was easier although they admitted that the opportunities were more abundant in the east, since the bulk of population and industry was there. Of course, were we to stay, and some others after us, it would not be long before Perth would have the one thing it lacked, more people, to become a paradise.

The display of piles and pyramids of gorgeous coloured, known and unfamiliar, fruits in the shop next to the restaurant impressed us again with its abundance. After dinner we returned to the ship where, before taking leave of us, our hosts gave each one ten shillings, equal in value to ten dollars today. It was a most extraordinary gesture of generosity, much appreciated.

The ship didn't linger, but got under way shortly after we returned on board and we, all of us talking at once, launched into excited and loud descriptions of what we had seen and what was uppermost in our minds from all the new and varied impressions, to any one who would listen.

It was possible to observe on each face the importance of the moment; the decision to pull up roots, to abandon home and everything familiar had been taken a long time back but had come to focus, to fruition with this first sight and contact with the Australian land. Until the actual first footfalls it had been unimaginable and nebulous, unrelated to anything previously experienced, in spite of what information one had. Now that the first impressions had had a little time to register, the various emotions were reflected in each face, according to age and origins. The young were full of ambitious hope but the older ones could not help making comparisons and looking to the past; the Italian, wondering whether he would be able to send something home to his family, perhaps save the fare for them to follow him soon to cut short his loneliness; the Englishman, worried about the sort of job he would get and would it be such as to justify him in his wife's eyes and finally silence the unadmitted doubt with which he abandoned the sure, though low-paying one, back home. For most of us the decision had not been quite so crucial for what had we left behind but bitter memories and for this there could be no regret. We only looked forward. In my mind there was no doubt. I was sure I would be able to make a living, perhaps even realise my vision of the open coupe by the seashore, which, after what I had seen in Perth, was, in my imagination, rolling up the driveway of a little cottage almost hidden behind shrubs covered by masses of tiny golden flowers.

As soon as the ship left the protection of Fremantle harbour the strong winds and high waves hit us again with increased force so that it was undeniably cold even when it was not raining, which drove me to my bunk. There was no rest to be had, in spite of my getting hold of the side and wedging myself in, I was in constant danger of being tossed, like a pancake by a clumsy cook, onto the deck, as I duplicated the movements of the ship on the waves.

The trip to Melbourne lasted five days and it was a roller-coaster ride all the way, even when in sight of land. I imagined that the sea would have been ashamed to continue misbehaving under the shore's eye, as it were. My stomach was in my throat one minute and ready to fall out the other end the next. The most unpleasant part, though, and what people most indignantly complained of was to get a load of someone else's sick in their face when they went to vomit over the side, not realising in their near death condition – as they thought – that the side of the ship over which to be sick had to be chosen with care, and the windward one was not it.

There was hardly anybody left in the dining room and the previously much sought after bread-rolls exuded their inviting aroma in vain. Many were left to wither on the tables in spite of my heroic efforts to rescue them from such a shameful fate. The bar was also pining for its many, former, literally fair-weather friends who felt drunk enough already. Only the crew were visible everywhere with mop and bucket. They were well aware how the sight and smell of one load of vomit engenders more, which they were anxious to prevent.

In spite of our repeatedly voiced convictions that it couldn't possibly get worse, it did, until everything movable had to be tied down and ropes had to be strung across open spaces where people had to pass, for them to hang on to, otherwise we would have slid about the decks as the chairs and tables had, before the crew got hold of them and tied them down to prevent them being smashed to bits.

The waves coming from the side imparted a cradle-like motion and didn't seem as disastrous as the ones attacking from the front, lifting, lifting the nose, until it seemed the big lumbering ship would stand on her tail, and running out the back from under her and letting her drop with a jolt, like a weightlifter with a barbell that was too much for his strength. This was repeated every ninety seconds or so, each time failing to dislodge the conviction that this time the ship would surely break apart.

When we tied up in Melbourne there was hardly a plate, or spirit, left unbroken on board. It was impossible to say whether the passengers or the crew were the happier to be rid of that sea, it must have been a thankless, endless, disgusting task cleaning up after all those sick and miserable passengers, to whom the sight of Melbourne was 'Paradise enow'.

Those who expected Melbourne to be like Perth were disappointed for although it was much larger, the port looked poorer and somewhat shabby and, as we found when we went in to the city, the suburbs we saw followed the pattern set in the port. Four out of my group had left the ship to settle in Perth and another ten got off in Melbourne. I saw Elizabeth get off also, but I didn't get the promised introduction to her nephew and niece, she was too taken up with good-byes and luggage.

Representatives from the Victorian branch of the Welfare Society awaited us, took charge of the ones staying and treated the rest of us to a trip into and around the city, and also to a movie and visit to a milk-bar. Although we had seen American drugstores in the movies this was a new experience for all of us, as was the milk shake we had there. They showed us a good time and used their private cars for our transport and their private means for our entertainment and were full of good will towards us, repeating until we learnt to say it: "You'll be all right in this country", a phrase we were to hear many more times. But it lost out in comparison with the welcome we had had in Perth — especially when we found that no money was forthcoming this time. I really could have used some.

Melbourne's beautiful, wide, straight roads, shiny shops and impressive department stores abounding in goods long missed and some never seen, struck me as more like the cities I was used to but it didn't tempt me enough to stay, as almost half of my fellow passengers seemed to be doing.

The weather had been overcast with lowering grey clouds scattering a fine chilling rain upon us while we were in Melbourne, but it cleared up, with every trace of storm gone by the time we resumed our journey, accompanied by a flight of countless gulls and two albatrosses, sailing and planing and riding the air around the ship, their streamlined wings and heads outstretched, held into the airstream, hardly moving a feather in their graceful glide that seemed to require no effort to stay aloft. Every so often one or the other would tilt his head to gaze at us, as if laughing at us, flightless and clumsy, on deck. As if they were responsible for the safe guiding of the ship, they would sometimes fly on ahead, to show the way, and at others veer to one side or the other, riding herd, to shoo us in the right direction.

No wonder sailors venerate the albatross. I sat in the stern for hours and watched their magnificence, the sun glinting on their unsullied smooth feathers as they revelled in their movement, the sun's rays and clear, invigorating air caressing them as they went. Seeing them made my last two days on board ship, which had been my home for the previous six weeks, even more pleasant. As we neared the shore to enter Port Jackson they disappeared.

An Englishman who had been stationed at Sydney during the war took up a position from where he could see and be seen as he came into his own and pointed out the beaches and cliffs, groups of houses like islands in a green sea forest, a dull, to me unknown, green; headlands and coves and bays within bays, naming each one. His voice rose in excitement as we sailed through a gap between two cliffs and he pointed ahead, and to the right as well, but the strange sounding names meant nothing to me – as yet.

A small motor-vessel with 'Pilot' written on it in large letters approached us as we turned into smooth water, hooked on and allowed a man to transfer himself on to the bottom of a long row of stairs, lowered and fixed for his convenience. He hurried to the bridge, to guide the ship in to her berth. We hastened slowly under his care and there was time for us to listen to the Englishman enumerate the many convolutions of a large and beautiful harbour, its numerous hills gently contoured and covered with trees right down to the water. There were many places seemingly suitable for swimming, of special interest to those of us who were keen bathers.

Numbers of wide-beamed ferry boats carrying many passengers sped past us in all directions and lots of sails tilted and glinted in the early sunlight as the boats manoeuvred on the glossy water, faintly reminiscent of the toy boats sailed by boys on the Luxembourg Gardens' pond in Paris. A very large bridge, like a dinosaur with its neck and tail extended, connected the two sides of the harbour and some of the ferries were passing under it but I was sure it would decapitate us if we ventured there – luckily, mistakenly. The Napoli was taken in charge by the two tugs which pushed and nudged her into her allotted place.

I was in sympathy with the general excitement at the prospect of arriving at the end of both voyage and uncertainty. We had been through a lot of experiences, capped by a storm, and had come to regard the ship as our secure base, although we had found it wobbly at times; now we were leaving it for we knew not what.

EX REFFOS

Zoltán and Adi Schwartz

WIS HOLO SURVIVORS

Opening of the exhibition at The Great Synagogue Sydney by the Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors

Copyright © Zoltán & Adi Schwartz 1999
All rights reserved
No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission

First published 1999 by Lina Publishing
P.O. Box A410 Sydney South 1235
Australia
email: linapublishing99@hotmail.com

National Library of Australia cataloguing in publication data.

Schwartz Zoltán & Adi
Survivors ISBN 0 9957 1632 X
Ex Reffos ISBN 0 9577 16311

Set in Agaramond, Newtown, Sydney - Australia
Printed in Newtown Sydney Australia

Cover design by: Zoltán & Adi Schwartz

VOLUME 2 CONTENTS

1 AUSTRALIA Page1

2 FIRST ENCOUNTERS . .Page 22

3 PARTY TIME . . . . .Page 39

4 MILDURA . . . . .Page 58

5 FOUNDATIONS . . . . .Page 74

6 INCOMPATIBILITY . . . .Page 94

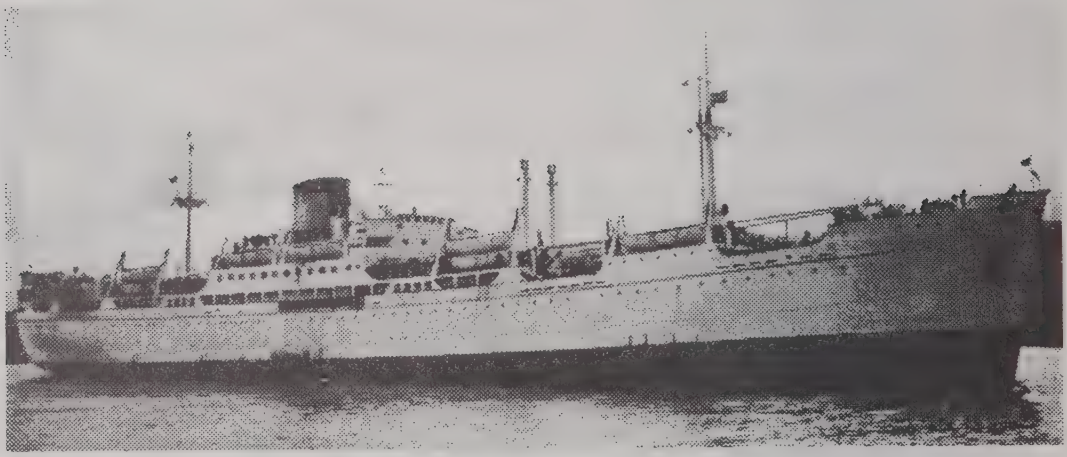
7 COMPENSATION . . . . .Page 108

8 MIRACLES ? . . . . .Page 124

9 LUCKY IN LOVE . . . . . .Page 147

10 REUNION . . . . .Page 164

M.V. Napoli.



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Some of us, survivors. i

The M. V. Napoli brought Zoltán to Australia iv

Learning English at the 'Home' 38

Zoltán and co-arrivals at a picnic, end of 1948 40

Auntie Peggy and Uncle John Lewinnek with Zoltán and Adi 40

Zoltán and Adi in August 1953 73

An early example of a Lina Product 93

Zoltán and family 1965 123

The authors with the just published The Army Cap Boy 1983 178

Map of journey to Australia 179

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Emigrant Ships to Luxury Liners by Peter Plowman, published by New South Wales University Press 1992.

Acknowledgment:

Our gratitude is due to Miriam Schifreen and Dora Velan for help in editing.

The names of persons still living have been changed and some characters are composites for reasons of privacy.

1 AUSTRALIA, OCTOBER 1948

The ship's loudspeaker came to life and, to my astonishment, I heard my name amongst a lot of other words in English. It could only mean that my presence was desired in the salon, to where I made my way without delay, wild conjectures chasing each other in my mind as to who could possibly want me and why. As far as I was aware I knew nobody in Sydney, where our ship had just tied up.

Maurice stopped me at the door. He was from Paris, but already looked Australian, with his lanky frame, square jaw and shock of brown wavy hair, which he wore combed back without a parting. He had also heard the announcement and begged me, in passing, not to drop his acquaintance, even after I should have risen in the world, if it turned out that a hitherto unheard of rich uncle – every new arrival's most desired relative – was the one looking for me.

No such luck, but someone almost as good, Tom, approached me and shook my hand heartily. I had met him for the first time a few months before in Paris and knew that he had preceded me to Australia. He was blond, slightly built and numbered English among the many languages he spoke fluently.

He was a little older than I and hailed originally from Budapest.

"I work for the Australian Jewish Welfare Society and came to meet your group in my official capacity," he explained with a smile. "When I saw your name on the list I wanted to make sure that it was really you." Somebody familiar and welcoming in this vast, new and foreign land was warmly reassuring.

Amazingly, although the ship had been good enough for a home for the last six weeks, some had even become sentimental about her, the instant we docked people pushed and elbowed for places in the queues prior to disembarking, so as not to remain on board one instant longer, or rather, to be off and doing, starting upon their career a second or two before the others. Or, perhaps pushing is as much a concomitant of queuing, as gesticulation is to talking.

Irritation crept into the excitement as people failed to find their luggage among the lots being hauled up from the hold by the cranes in giant sized rope-net bags and transferred unto the deck. We were ushered and persuaded into the large salon where the immigration officials, who had come on board, scanned everybody's documents, these, most precious proofs to our right to life, and slammed official rubber stamps on them as fast as their hands could move. When the officials had finally put all the official stamps on all the official papers, and other officials had inspected those papers and the stamps stamped on them and put more stamps to show that they had so inspected and then checked the papers which proved that we had received all the injections mentioned in them, we were free to find our luggage and say good-bye to the crew and ship.

This was tinged with sadness amidst the excitement of arrival, because the M.V Napoli had been our home for the past month and a half, and her crew our companions. The frighteningly stormy and frightfully steamy days stood out of the past fifty, never to be forgotten. Exotic scenes like the swarm of little boats, laden with leather and basket ware – a veritable oriental bazaar on water – clustering around our ship anchored off shore in romantic, far off, to us hitherto legendary, places like Port Said and Colombo, are there for instant recall in my memory in all their first clarity still

I didn't have a passport. Although I had been living in France for the four previous years I was not a citizen, nor, under the laws then prevailing, was I likely to become one. I loved France – once again normal, decent France – and I still do, but I had been merely a tolerated alien. I did not belong. It was not my country. I had none.

Instead of a passport I had, by grace of the French Authorities, a strip of reinforced paper folded up concertina fashion, called a *titre de voyage,* an internationally valid document for that journey only. At the time of my visit to Hungary I had had a re-entry permit from the French and a visitor's visa from the Hungarians, but for the voyage to Australia the People's Republic of Hungary refused to give me a passport. Hungary and I had given each other up – finally and officially. In my *titre de voyage* against nationality, was the pronouncement: 'Stateless'.

The long, suspended stairs along the side of the ship, where the pilot had come on board at The Heads, led my unsteady feet on to the land which was to be my home from then on, a country I had hardly heard of until four months before.

With Tom's help our group sorted itself into three cars driven by members of the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Australian Jewish Welfare Society. We were taken, together with our belongings, over railway lines, across bridges, along roads lined with red brick cottages, for nearly an hour. We made many attempts at conversation and inquiry, but even the simplest had to be given up for lack of a common language. At last we drew up on a rise, in front of a single storied sprawling building with large grassed areas in front and what looked to be impenetrable bush behind. The road continued on skirting a large park, to disappear among weird looking trees with velvety-green foliage and naked trunks shedding tatters of bark like the seven veils on an untidy stripper. Glint of water could be glimpsed at the bottom, the sort of spectacular view we, along with the 'old' inhabitants of Sydney, quickly came to take for granted in this water-girt city.

A very tall man of about sixty or sixty-five, slightly bent in the middle, approached us and, to my delight and surprise, greeted us in Hungarian and then in German, for the benefit of the unfortunates amongst us who hadn't the privilege of what soon became the second most important language in Sydney. He told us that his name was Schneider and that he had landed in Australia just in time for the Great Depression. He warned us that on no account were we to venture out in bare feet at night for poisonous snakes and spiders could bite us, they were dangerous and plentiful. Our consternation exceeded our former delight. For what kind of primitive jungle had we left the glitter of Paris – where we had also needed protection, especially at night, but not for our feet.

"You will each receive ten shillings a week pocket money," Mr. Schneider announced, and made it clear that the Society would only stake us to a trip to the city for good and proper reasons, which we were hard put to invent, such as, "I need to see the dentist", who donated his services free to us while still unemployed and whose surgery was in Elizabeth Street; or ditto the doctor, who was in Paddington.

In the evening the other boys in residence, most of them from Czechoslovakia, who had arrived on the ship previous to ours, returned home. They already spoke a smattering of English which made them the subject of our undisguised jealousy and grudging respect. Even though we had problems of communication, because they spoke Czech and we spoke French, they told us, in a mixture of German and Yiddish, that they had found boys already ensconced in the building upon their arrival three months before. That first group had since been helped to stand on their own feet, as they themselves would fairly soon be, and we in our turn.

The house was part of the Sir Moses Montefiore Home for the aged and Isabella Lazarus Home for orphans of the Jewish Community, temporarily given over to us, new immigrant boys, until we could establish ourselves. The girls were accommodated with private families upon their arrival, much to our regret.

We were expected to clean the dormitories, help in the kitchen, serve the food and look after ourselves generally, as the sum total of staff besides Mr. Schneider was Mayer, the cook, from Germany. The large modern kitchen had ceramic floor tiles and the dining room's parquetry floor was highly polished, easy both for cleaning and on the eye. Wide verandahs in the Australian style helped to keep the heat out and were ideal for many of our games even on rainy days. In no time we sorted ourselves into groups of eight to match the accommodation in the bright, airy dormitories. I drew Bill and Theo as immediate neighbours, and considered myself lucky for only Bill talked in his sleep. He told me it was an early habit and had nothing to do with the horrors he had been through, as I had surmised.

We managed a quick shower before dinner, another surprise. In Europe we were used to a main course of a small island of meat surrounded by a sea of vegetables and salad in a separate bowl. Here, we found a continent of steak with tiny islands of peas and carrots, a volcano of chips complete with tomato sauce eruption and reefs of undressed salad in the form of sliced tomatoes and shredded lettuce, all on the one large plate. We brought along matching appetites.

Our anxiety laden questions were unending: How do people live here? Are there jobs? How much can a person earn? What's the price of a shirt, a pair of trousers? What sort of transport was there for getting to the city? Our informants were pleased to explain, showing off their superior knowledge as though they had arrived with the First Fleet. Jobs were no problem, you could walk into one almost anywhere. As we were under twenty-one, then the age of majority, our pay would not be enough to live on. Clothes were dear. A pair of trousers could cost as much as nine pounds nineteen and eleven, nearly two weeks' wages. The bus from the stop around the corner would take you down to the water and a ferry whisk you into town the easiest and quickest way and a pleasure to boot, or, a different bus would take you into Gladesville from where a tram would rattle you in, a thrilling ride. The toast rack trams had crosswise compartments without obstructing, exterior walls or doors. This allowed you to hop off, as we used to do, nearest our mid-stop destination. You felt an intimacy with the outside racing by, including the odd horse-drawn cart, trucks of every description and load, as well as the elements. The only obstacle to these whiskings and rattlings was the lack of money for the fare, from which we all suffered.

I wanted to ask about the meaning of nine pounds nineteen and eleven, but couldn't get a word in and had to wait until Mr. Schneider got around to explaining – as he did everything else – the intricacies of the imperial monetary system to which Australia clung, that caused me, brought up as I had been under simple, though comparatively boring, decimals, both astonishment and awe not again experienced until I came up against the system of weights and measures, nothing to do with, the by then expected, twelve.

Although I prided myself on my ability to calculate fast enough to race an abacus I was grateful I had gone in for the fur trade, which would not involve me in the need to work out the price of five and a half ounces of cheese at thirteen (shillings) and six (pence) a pound (sixteen ounces) while the customer waited. I soon found out that, of course, shop assistants were not expected to perform such feats of arithmetical agility five and a half days a week. They had the convenience of tables to read off on their scales, but it was still an inordinately cumbersome, exasperating system. Somebody calculated how many school hours were wasted learning it, not to mention business hours using it, but only despised foreigners, lacking appreciation of its character building values, wished for change to another, that offered speed and ease. It took us, Australians, by this time well diluted by immigrants, another twenty years to make our first venture into decimals.

Trips into town were not only a minor triumph of outsmarting the Society but also journeys of adventure into unknown territory. We needed to be orientated with the locations of shops, the names of streets and the lie of the land. Although Mr. Schneider must have been familiar with any and all of desperate nineteen year olds' mindset, it was still possible to wheedle extra trips from him on the flimsiest excuses. Ten shillings a week didn't take us far or nearly often enough.

Besides providing bed, board, lessons, health and pocket money, the Society went to a lot of trouble to find weekend hosts for us as well, in sure knowledge that the best entry for a newcomer is through the doors of the earlier inhabitants, and not, as we imputed to It, to give the cook the week end off. It showed a foresighted and benevolent eye to our future. While we were anxious to get to know the place, the Society, in its wisdom, wanted us to get to know the people. We, dumb nineteen-year-olds, in our European style clothes and haircuts, subject to excruciating embarrassments of my bidet episode sort, didn't relish being planted on a local, strange family with their incomprehensible language and ways. We were reluctant guests, for who would wish to exchange the comforts of Home and the easy companionship of like-minded friends for agonized conversation on boring topics in what might as well have been Sanskrit.

On one of these occasions I was spending the week end with a fine, childless couple who later became dear friends, Uncle John and Auntie Peggy. I was sitting with her in the sunny front garden conversing – she with her school French of thirty years before and I with my newly learned irregular verbs like bought and thought – but floundering. It was nearing four o'clock and she asked me to, "Go and put the kettle on, Zoltán, would you?"

I got up at once and went inside without the least idea of what a kettle might be. I looked around for inspiration and caught sight of the cat curled up in a splash of sunshine, peacefully asleep in the armchair. I picked up the innocent animal and carried it out the back door, where I gently placed it on the ground and returned to the front garden.

About ten minutes later we went inside, Auntie Peggy to make the tea and I because she was going, but found the stove empty of kettle, boiling or otherwise.

"I thought you put the kettle on for me, Zoltán, why didn't you?" she asked me with curiosity. I hummed and I hawed, but eventually had to come out with the truth, and said, "I didn't know what kettle was, I saw the cat there, and I worked it out that it must be time for it to go about its business outside. Kettle must mean, 'cat little'." She didn't want to embarrass me but could not hide her laughter.

We had to appear at the 'Mac' every Friday morning and receive the name and address of our brave and generous host of the next two days from Mr. Brand, the Society's Executive Secretary. He must have been around fifty at that time, spare, with a stern expression on his lined face. He was impeccably and sombrely dressed, no matter what the weather, in a woollen suit, complete with waistcoat and tie, in those air-conditionless days! I felt he talked down to us, refugees, from under his prominent, imposing nose and great height, which added to the lack of attraction to my visits there. I labelled him an 'English Type' although the English Jews were in reality Russian Jews once, or at most twice, removed, most of them having first set foot across the Channel at the end of the nineteenth or beginning of the twentieth century. I took advantage of Tom's mediation whenever he was around, or failing him, turned to Miss Chapman. She had the easy job of finding us employment. Because of her full, shapely lips we called her Kissy among ourselves and as soon as we could put two words together in English invented all sorts of reasons for visiting her desk. She spoke only English, with a lisp! In spite of this we had no trouble understanding her and took pleasure in watching every undulation of those enticing Cupid's bows, accentuated by a hint of a black down, as she formed the words. Possibly because of the language and age barriers, Mr. Brand remained as inscrutable to me at the end of our association as he had been in the beginning.

The scene of his activities, the 'Mac', was the Maccabean Hall next to the Jewish War Memorial in Darlinghurst where functions and wedding receptions were held at ground level and the Society's offices were located among a conglomeration of other Jewish organizations upstairs. I don't think any of us was fully aware of the privilege bestowed upon us with those weekend invitations. Our hosts were the leaders of the community, who, having seen the need, were the first to volunteer to do what needed to be done.

Among my hosts was one of these, S. D. E., a brilliant star in a veritable Milky Way, who went on even to the heights of Canberra in the years following. His wife, daughter and son took their share of the burdens of hospitality, but on the Saturday night of my visit the whole family had to go out, "for just a couple of hours," leaving me in restful but boring loneliness in their comfortable, large house until the return home of their maid.

Jessy was about sixteen at this time of early summer, 1948. She had a plump figure, generous breasts, chunky thighs and a well endowed behind. She was justly proud of her pearly teeth with the little gap in front that served to point up their perfection, which she showed off in her frequent smiles. She was in the habit of uselessly smoothing back an escaped lock of hay coloured hair, which usually hid half her round face. She brought an assortment of nuts, lollies and fruit into the sitting room and soon started to munch on them for want of a better occupation, since we were unable to communicate in words. Nevertheless, she didn't stop talking, slowly, clearly and loudly, in the mistaken belief, very commonly held, that that would help.

The platter was nearly empty by the time Jessy became convinced that we were not advancing in our conversation. Just one breath ahead of irreclaimable ennui she brought out a pack of cards, dealt them up and started to teach me to play.

Having lived, ever since the liberation, in the middle of a large coterie of my peers, I could claim, without boasting, intimate knowledge of seventeen different card games (five of them poker). I understood at once that we were to play gin-rummy. We played for kisses (my suggestion) so the name of the game diminished in importance, as did whether I won or lost, because, after a great deal of demonstrative gestures we agreed that the loser would give and the winner receive the payment.

At first it was with a shy gesture that she extended her neck to enable me to plant my pecks on her cheek, but as we progressed the play changed character until the kisses became long and impassioned and soon the cards were abandoned and we embraced and then kissed again and romped all over the room. We rolled on the carpet and hugged in the armchair and finished on the settee where we stripped each other's clothes off in the urgency of the moment. We understood everything without words and were in perfect harmony.

The returning family found the room quite restored and us demurely sitting by the radio; then the main source of home entertainment. The neglected cards bore false witness to our impeccable behaviour during their absence. Had we been able to talk I have no doubt Jessy and I would have found nothing in common and would have spent the evening unremarkably instead of so memorably, gloriously! That weekend became a wonderfully hard act to follow for my subsequent hosts. From then on, when I heard the other boys complain about the twin hardships of long days with total strangers without benefit of language I used to remain mysteriously silent. Nowadays it seems *de rigeur* among us, of grandparent age, to deprecate young morals. Again I am silent.

Another Friday morning at the 'Mac' I received a rabbi as my host. I wondered, were we matched by names pulled out of a hat or according to chance of position on a list? I protested as strongly as my language and gestures allowed, that I was not religious and therefore unsuitable as a rabbi's guest, that although I had come from a religious family, that had been a long time ago and I no longer knew how to behave in an observant household, it was hard enough with an ordinary host with whom the sum of my conversation was usually: "Yes" or "No" – what did they expect me to do with a rabbi? "It's not for me," I protested. But nothing would do.

The rabbi's wife, a smartly dressed, pretty, young woman of modern appearance and sympathetic mien, who spoke fluent French, picked me up in her car. Their home was a small cottage with modern furniture and the largest private library I had seen, full of tomes in Hebrew; novels in English; history books in French and poetry in German. It appeared to be a very comfortable place to live in.

My rabbi host and his wife took me to a Chinese restaurant after the Temple service and I found out that their being liberal referred to their religious observance and not to their politics. I was absolutely astounded and spent a lovely weekend.

On Sunday night when we had all returned from our various weekends we compared experiences and how we had managed, and boasted and exaggerated about the hardship we may have had, the way we did with the boys from the Derna, the ship that left Marseilles a week before us and arrived two weeks after us. They had told us how they had been covered in coal dust all the way from Marseilles because she was fuelled by coal. She managed to keep going, mostly on her reputation of former glory, but slowly, so that they, "had to get out and push." She broke down in mid-ocean and was coaxed as far as Melbourne where she gave up altogether and her Sydney-bound passengers had to complete their voyage by other means. We, the Napoli contingent, had to retire, beaten in the contest, for we only had rotten onion smell served hot to complain about.

After my weekend with the rabbi I was the centre of interest. Everyone wanted to know how I had spent a day in which no cards, sport, riding in cars, radio, shopping or smoking was allowed – in fact only prayer, study and the enjoyment of quiet rest is encouraged. When I told them about my liberal rabbi I precipitated quite an argument, as heated as the ones we used to have among our crowd in Paris. Opinions were loudly and vehemently voiced, some claiming the ideal of perfection for human behaviour was still as laid down in the Bible; some others shouting that "It is impossible to live like that in this day, it was made for tribal villages." There were some others who reinforced the last by saying "It is no longer necessary, we have modern hygiene and laws, the whole thing is a load of superstitious mumbo jumbo anyway," and one who concluded that "Perhaps it is better to keep some of the laws than none, you never know, G-d may exist after all, and then you would really be in the shit."

I listened. I was no longer sure, not as sure as I had been in the camp, that G-d had abandoned us. It was something to think much about.

One thing we were all agreed on, though, was the kindness, the welcome we had each received from our hosts. We were impressed that even after they had collected the money for our fares they continued to fund our living in the home, have us taught the language and when they were finished with one lot of us, got on with the next. It seemed as if they were an army opposed to that other – the destroyers who had spent every bit of their energy on annihilation. These were part of the second nation I had come across that was willing to give refuge, the second set of people dedicated to building up; to restoring to life!

Riding in the ferry immediately imparted a holiday air to our jaunts to the city in spite of the many severely dressed fellow passengers whose faces already reflected a preoccupation with their imminent re-entry into the workaday routine. I walked about the city just getting familiar with the locations of transport stops, surgeries, (doctor's or dentist's) the offices of officialdom with which I needed to deal from time to time as a new arrival and first name terms with streets and department stores. On one occasion I was even asked for directions but by the time I worked out what was wanted and put together the answer the inquirer was on his way having been steered right by a quicker source. I never had to worry about getting lost in those pre-skyscraper days for the hump of the Bridge (with the ferry at its foot) was visible from almost anywhere. I used to make my way there in the late afternoon, to sink exhausted onto an outside bench for the ride home.

Askance looks cast in our direction whenever we appeared in public never bothered me. I had had the clothes I wore tailor-made in Paris, the first ones in my life paid for out of my very own earnings and I was proud of them. However, those whom it concerned in the Society, probably the ever elegant Mr. Brand, must have noticed the glaring style difference between us and the locals and decided that something had to be done.

We were directed to Palmer's Department Store on the corner of Pitt and Park Streets, where Waltons later stood for many years, to be fitted out with 'bum-freezers', the short jackets that everybody wore. We were taught to speak in low tones or to keep mum to avoid questioning looks or even nasty comments like, "Can't ya talk Orstralian?" Since we couldn't, with great exertion of self discipline we limited our public conversation to bare necessities. This, as all good habits, was to come useful later on when you could hardly utter a Hungarian word in Sydney without being understood. It served to save me from all but two embarrassing encounters. Once, when I glowingly commented on the size and shape of a passing lady's curves and another time when I was beaten to a parking spot. I let the motorist have the classic, standard Hungarian expletive regarding his mother. I also maligned her reputation while I was about it, (probably).

We had left Europe at summer's end to arrive here for its beginning – an entire winter disappeared on the way! I wholeheartedly blessed the loss although the climate unsettled my new found self confidence and budding belief in what I was constantly told, accompanied by a pat or two on the shoulder, that I'll, "Be orright mate".

There would be glorious blue skies and brilliant sunshine with just a hint of a caress in the air arriving in the nick of time to cool the skin and prevent acute discomfort when, in a twinkling, the world darkened under unrolling black tumults above and sudden gusts whirling below to sweep leaves, loose papers and full skirts up high. Zigzags of lightning raced each other in a celestial hide and seek and the winner applauded with a thunder clap, as if an inch from my ear. Then rain fell. At first in rare, large warm drops but soon in icy torrents, as if the flash of light had been a laser slash in the dam wall somewhere overhead. By the time I found shelter the whole overdramatised spectacle was past. The triumphant sun again lit and warmed as it was meant to. Steam rising from the roadways swirled gently in a breeze which coaxed the last drops off leaves here or eaves there, straight into the spaces between necks and collars. I found it impossible to decide in the mornings what clothes to wear for the day, now that I had more than one set.

Whether to advance our integration, as we were told, with instructions to mix, or to provide holidays for the cook, as we cynically supposed, we were packed off, willy-nilly, to Youth Camp in the beginning of January. My sole experience of camp had been in Bergen-Belsen so the word conjured up unwelcome connotations and negative images.

This camp was on the plain near Richmond, west of Sydney. In spite of my misgivings I boarded the train at Central Station early in the morning with the rest from the Home, for my first train ride in Australia. None of us had more than a vague idea of where exactly the camp was, so, although we got off at the right station it was nearly dark by the time we stumbled in, tired and hungry, to what turned out to be, to our utter consternation, a true-blue scouting type camp with tents to sleep in and mosquitoes to prevent it. Lack of tent allocation and absence of dinner prepared us for the worst and some of us would have turned around and gone back again right then, including me, had we but known a shortcut. After all, the whole idea behind camping is to teach pampered city youth a bit of rough living, and personally, what I needed was a bit (or a bit more) of pampering instead.

All was forgiven, though, in the morning, when a table laden with corn flakes, fresh milk and fresh bread with many kinds of jam as well as still sizzling eggs greeted us under benevolent skies. Even the magpies, which could have been expected to be quite blasé about it, were unanimous in their carolling praise. Camp assumed a whole new complexion, but not for long.

Our efforts at a pretence of order passed inspection and we proceeded to the 'pow-wow'. This meant sitting in the increasingly hot January sun listening to speaker after speaker – in English of course. Since we, the Home contingent, benefited from no more than 10% of what were surely words of wisdom, with one accord we quietly took our departure and also, involuntarily, our share of the flies. In those pre-Aerogard days we had no means to stop them.

Cows were busily grazing here and there to complete the rural scene and we ambled aimlessly among them until Bill, always alert to any advantage, (re)discovered the River. Before anyone could object we were in it, although it looked quite muddy. We splashed, dived, jumped, swam and cooled off in blissful fun and total ignorance of the treacherous nature of that particular stretch of river. Because of the lie of the terrain the area was, and still is, subject to regular flooding, at which times large branches are swept along and are deposited there, to become traps for the unwary ankle, and rocks find a temporary resting place to become immovable objects for the irresistible force of the diving skull.

When our absence was discovered we were cajoled out of the water with promises of swimming later and straggled miserably back to camp and speeches, protesting loudly that, “Ve anderstan’ nutting”. The swimming materialised in the afternoon, a half a mile upstream, where it was safe. We only found out much later about the drowning and paraplegia we escaped but which others didn’t, as we are informed year after year in the media.

Now, with the hindsight of my seventy years I am amazed at how we made our blundering way amid the unseen dangers in our new country, most of us unscathed, as we continued to jump and dive and swim carelessly into any fun going, never minding the snags and rocks.

Football, here known, though not then much played, as soccer, was still our favourite game and no matter how enthusiastically the locals, with whom we had strict instructions to mix, explained cricket’s joys and intricacies we would not be enticed to try it. Some of us are innocent of it yet, including me, for my son, to whom under ordinary circumstances it would have fallen as a backup system to teach me, wasn't that keen either and my grandchild is as yet just a hope of a breath in the bosom of the future.

All that exertion ensured that we polished off whatever was set on the table before us, even onto burnt stew, with a good appetite, and later, around the campfire the soccer players joined the cricket players in dancing and singing in perfect harmony.

As the campfire died down the stars shone out, like a changing of the guard, until we saw them extinguished by big low clouds proceeding across the entire canopy over us. We got about four hours sleep and woke to the sound of drumming, gushing rain to realize that camp must be abandoned at once. Already we were calf deep in mud.

Physical strength was never my boast. We found it strenuous work to pick up the tents, heavy with water, while forcing our feet out of the bog into which they sank at every step. Shouted instructions were hard to hear against the roar of the rain. Sopping clothes stuck to our limbs – all in the dark. The dark bothered me the least, I couldn't see through my rain streaked glasses anyhow. The joys of camping! We agreed that it must be an acquired taste and cursed the rain, not yet aware of its importance in this parched land.

Against all expectation – a couple of times I had thought I'd have to leave my feet behind – we made it to Richmond Station and eventually to the longed for comforts of Home, dripping, chilled and covered by mosquito bites.

"It's a really worthwhile challenge for city softies who think milk grows in a bottle," Charles said as we revelled under the shower and let the hot stream ease pain and chill out of our bones. He was short, had straight brown hair and a serious streak and prided himself on his spending resistance. "I like my picnics," he announced, "seated at the table of some rustic tavern, tucking into unburnt food with proper cutlery and completely segregated from the animal kingdom."

Mayer, the cook and totum factum, had indeed gone on holiday so we had the chance to acquire yet more, not sought but always useful, skills. It fell to Mr. Schneider, once again, to teach us, instead of enjoying his anticipated respite. English classes also resumed upon our return from camp. Mr. Schneider, out of his certainty that our success or failure to come could possibly depend on the one additional word or bit of information we acquired, played his part and poured them forth with enthusiasm. We basked under his supervision and tutelage. He was an extraordinary man. He had come to Australia in the nineteen twenties and had been hit by the depression just when he tried to start up in business on his own. He was both educated and cultured and brought his varied experience to the task of cramming a practical knowledge of English into us in the shortest time. He spoke with a harsh accent – no matter what language he used it all sounded German – but this didn't bother us. He compiled a booklet containing the most needed words and phrases in all their combinations and, of course, his accent didn't come through into the print.

He was our teacher, mentor, adviser, and supervisor and we all knew that a better man for the job could not have been found, perhaps in the whole of Australia. He was goodhearted, understanding, responsible and strict. He ladled into us the information he considered essential at every opportunity, with an urgency that made us suspect that the next boatload was already on its way. We obeyed him and did our best to learn what he expected, although it was a lot. We tried all sorts of techniques, like learning stock phrases, but found that there were no shortcuts and there was no substitute for plain, old-fashioned swotting, no matter how hard that came to us, years away from the schoolroom.

Stories of his own experience in which the hardship of the depression remained fresh, in spite of the intervening years, illustrated all of Mr. Schneider's explanations about our new country and its people. He told us how hard it had been to get a job and how lucky he had felt when he managed to get one carrying bricks to the upper levels at the building of a Catholic church although he'd never been a builders' labourer. The wages he received were just enough for food and a bed in a room he shared with three others. Even then he had kept his vision of a bright future for Australia and was triumphant to have lived to see it vindicated, although he was too old to benefit much himself. For us, though, it was all there.

He would stand in the corner of the 'schoolroom' and pour learning into us as though through a funnel. He explained about the difference here compared to what we were used to, in customs, lifestyle and attitude. He dwelt on the practical aspect of the Australian mentality of fair go, according to which a person didn't have to carry identity papers, was not subject to unjustified searches and was considered innocent until proven guilty. He said we would often hear the expression: "It's a free country" and this is what it referred to and to the right of each citizen to live according to his religion or politics or opinion of any sort, no matter how eccentric as long as he didn't hurt others or himself, and the freedom with which a citizen was entitled to pursue his happiness in any direction he chose; could voice his criticism of those in power without let or hindrance.

We rostered ourselves into teams of three to take care of the chores including cooking. The results were just this side of edible at first. Peter, the know it all, was sure Mayer became a cook solely on the basis of the extra ten kilos he was carrying but I defended him for his inspiration, negative though it was, for he knew more ways of ruining good food than any individual could possibly achieve without this. Soft boiled eggs were either raw or hard as billiard balls; hard boiled eggs were just a shell of their rightful selves leaking murky water on to the plate, having lost their contents when Mayer dropped them into rapidly boiling water, where they promptly cracked, straight out of the fridge. Even ordinary boiled potatoes, whether whole in their skin or cut into ivory blocks with just a hint of fluffiness, delicious either way with just a bit of salt if properly tended, turned into a soggy unappetising mess under his huge hands. He was big all over, and not married at nearly fifty, because, it was rumoured, of a meal he had cooked for his fiancée. She had taken one mouthful and fled.

Along with the mystery of the way of a ship upon the ocean there was the eternal mystery of the way a man and his field of work are matched together. My left handed path to fur through many a detour into other, equally honourable endeavours; such as printing and dental technology, to mention but two, was just as mysterious.

Without exception we were all full of ambition and never tired of discussing the important subject of which trade or profession led quickest to riches. Getting a good job, every youngster's absorbing aim, was just the first item on our agenda.

Founded on his stint at the stove, Larry was the first to strike out, to become the wonder and example to the rest of us. With a chef's hat on his head and wielding a spatula with speed and accuracy, he could be admired in the window of a George Street hamburger joint six nights of the week after just two dinner performances for us at the Home. "What can I lose?" he asked when I expressed doubts as to his ability to cope. "The customers and the boss put together cannot be harsher critics than you lot!" By the time Mayer returned we were able to comment on his performance with knowledge born of experience.

The only language which I had absorbed 'through my pores' had been Yiddish, while I had worked for my dear old boss, M. Prager, in Paris. I was learning German and perfecting French at the same time, but for those I had to make an effort and I found the same necessity with English. We all tried various methods. Bill, more eager for a game of ping-pong, even suggested that, "we'll learn as we go along while mixing with the population, once we'll be among them".

"You certainly will," Mr. Schneider admitted, "the more so as the second language, like the second million, is supposed to come much quicker, but you'll learn and speak incorrectly, young as you are, for the rest of your lives. It is four times as hard to correct than to learnt the right way from scratch. Believe me!" I did and persevered, in spite of the fact that odd words like towel and mower stubbornly refused to be pushed into my brain. Some others, like wardrobe, flew in, then continued straight through and out again. My daughter, a French and English teacher, teaches both as a second language. She keeps me *au currant* with the wild and wonderful tricks used nowadays to make learning easier, like casettes and videos, role plays and active participation in class performances. More power to them! I bet the students still have to keep repeating the words until their braincells accept them, just like I had to, and I knew that a mower cuts grass but doesn't dry skin.

In the meantime, underlying all the study, was our basic anxiety about our future, in spite of the constant reassurance of, "you'll be orright in this country," although, like the patient's pain to the visitor, it wasn't the thing to let it show. With the end of our stay at the Home approaching fast, never mind the second million, our immediate concern was to make our first, or anyway, a living.

2 FIRST ENCOUNTERS.

What the boys of the previous contingent had told us regarding the ease of getting jobs proved true. All the worry I had expended on that score would have been better spent on concern for a room, which was difficult indeed to find. There were no cheap and impersonal hotel rooms, as in Paris, it was invariably a boarding house that came closest to our needs. You kept hearing horror stories of having to get up at four in the morning to buy a copy of The Herald, and armed with pennies, (two per phone call) fight for a turn at the public telephone. Or, risking all on a single throw, because you would have missed out at any subsequent place by the time you got there, turn up at the address, if (rarely) given, without ringing first. Once there, you had to walk up and down outside until signs of life became noticeable, about six thirty, while still keeping your place in the queue, first second or third. You had to be really desperate to stay as fourth. Your chance to inspect finally came, but actually you were inspected and made to listen to the landlady's – they always seemed to be female – tirade of house rules of dos and don'ts. Then you had to decide quickly whether you could live with them. These were more sacrosanct than the ten commandments. Disobey those and you may or may not be immediately struck by lightning, but there was neither doubt nor delay of retribution, mostly in the form of immediate expulsion, if you broke these. This happened to me on my twenty-first birthday, which, in 1950 fell on a Sunday. I was caught *in flagrante delicto,* in the heinous crime of washing my only whole pair of socks in the bathroom basin. Nothing would do, I had to pack and go at once, sopping socks and all. It struck me many times that in a community so devoted to minding its own business landladies should be so preoccupied with mine.

As a result, first of the depression, then the war and finally a shortage of raw materials and workforce after it, there had been very little building done in Australia for fifteen years. The return of thousands of servicemen reunited with their wives who had endured the depression and war years back at Mum's and could hardly wait to set up on their own, coincided with the arrival of an ever increasing flood of immigrants eager to start the better lives they had come for.

We, immigrants, were under the delusion that we had left Europe for better opportunities under the healing, free atmosphere of this country, but actually we were brought here in order to populate Australia and save it from the 'Yellow Peril' as well as to furnish the muscles and provide the means to increase and diversify its manufacturing productivity while at the same time ensure a more numerous, viable home market for those products. Quite an agenda for us, 'reffos', 'dregs' and 'remnants', but, and I will avoid the trap of false modesty here, not impossible. I hereby claim my share of having justified Arthur Calwell's 'vision splendid' and belatedly salute him, though he be mouldering in his grave these many years.

In their wisdom, the immigration authorities required that work and accommodation be provided for the new arrivals by their sponsors so it fell to Tom, acting on behalf of the Society, to find my first home away from Home and to Kissy to find my first job. One day I was called into the office at the 'Mac' and, like Adam, received my banishment from what had truly been an idyll in Eden. I had to start, like him, to earn my bread with the sweat of my brow. The banishment came in the form of a piece of paper with my future employer's name and address on it.

On the sixth floor of a Clarence Street building I found a large room full of people busy manufacturing ladies fashion suits and overcoats with one section devoted to fur trimmings, such as collars and cuffs, to go on them. My department. A short

Scotsman, whom I'll call McLevy, all unconscious of the importance of the occasion, took me to a workbench without delay or ceremony. He gave me some skins of a kind I had never seen before, uttered a terse sentence, probably of instructions, and left before I could ask him to show me, for I had understood nothing. My ears, tuned to Mr. Schneider's thick Berlin accent, were unable to adjust to McLevy's equally thick Glasgow one. I tried to figure out what may be wanted but didn't get far and received the full blast of the boss' rage, enough for a man twice his size, when he returned and found the job unfinished.

Oh for the last few weeks gone by when after the hours of study the summer waited for us on the many glorious beaches ! We had lost no time in discovering them. Some were on the harbour shore with soft blond sands and unrippled, quiet waters in the depths of some bay or cove, where neither blade of grass nor leaf stirred and even the tide came in with a tentative shlap-shlap, on tiptoe, lest it disturb the somnolent sunbathers. Some others were on the open ocean where the smooth backed green humps followed one another like legions hurrying to besiege the beach, broke and spilled their curling burden in the shallows and gasped out their last strength in frothy foam on the sands.

On any hot day in early January, still part of the annual holiday period of most workers, we were an unnoticeable addition to the throngs already lolling, scattered like hundreds-and-thousands on a cake, on Bondi Beach – which quickly became one of our favourite meeting places. Appraising and appreciative male eyes ran along the female contours – even though Australian swimsuits were less revealing than those on the beaches of the Marne, or, in our other regular Parisian haunt, the Neptune swimming pool. There bikinis had been the mode. Had I not seen with my own astonished eyes a Beach Inspector go up to a girl and measure the midriff gap between the two pieces of her costume with a tape measure, I would not have believed it. He proved that it exceeded the permitted maximum of four inches (100mm), and he ordered her to cover up or get off the beach, in this, the fourth year after the end of the war! Of course I should have been prepared for it by the costume I had to wear instead of my G-string. It covered me from waist to thigh and featured a little additional skirt section where it was most effective. On the other hand, equally surprising, when attired in this costume, plus a towel draped around our necks, we were allowed to travel on public transport and even eat in beach-side restaurants, for all of which activities you had to be properly clad in street clothes in permissive France.

My admiration was divided between the girls and the body surfers – board surfers were yet to come. To catch a wave, you had to stand where they just began to curl over, chest deep in water, facing the sea, quickly turn and, using a fast Australian crawl, get lifted up to be borne shorewards in front of the foam, seemingly with hardly any further effort. Just the backs of the surfers' heads were visible in the white creaming water speeding to the shallows, then, a wide open, air gulping mouth would appear for an instant. As soon as the ride was over they would return to the 'station' and wait patiently for the next likely wave. Sometimes I too managed to catch one, more by luck than skill, and thrilled to the rush through the bubbling foam, exhilarating as the long ago sled rides down steep hillsides of fluffy snow.

The harbourside pools were fenced against sharks while volunteer lifesavers watched over the bathers on the open beaches and gave the alarm by ringing an enormous bell to summon all to shore if a shark was sighted, until it was taken or chased away. These same lifesavers, strapping young men especially trained for the job, were ever vigilant for people in difficulty or out of the safe areas between the flags, an arduous, constant and thankless task among the independent Australian spirits resentful of being told where they may or may not swim.

No wonder we took to this life and dived in head first like eager grooms into marriage. We went to Bondi Beach or Redleaf Pool as often as our finances permitted, which meant pretty often because it was a rare weekend host, who, remembering his own youth, failed to slip us a pound or two to eke out our pocket money. Pity it only lasted three months.

My first wages, a junior's, as I was under 21, were three pounds sixteen shillings a week after tax, not enough to live on no matter how frugally, so it was fortunate that I was able to continue in the Home for another month.

An intimation of the impending heave-ho came in the form of another summons to the 'Mac', where I expounded my arithmetic, that three pounds, the very lowest rent I could hope for, subtracted from three pounds sixteen left enough for one sandwich per day never mind fares and dinners! The Society, having launched hundreds before me, promised to subsidise me until I could earn enough. I was handed my tea, butter, sugar and clothing coupons – ridiculous to us in their generosity: which of us used up half a pound of tea a year let alone a week? – and turned loose.

No longer did a meal await me after work, I had to make do with what I could buy for my money in some restaurant. The supplement from the Society was some help, but it takes familiarity with a place to make the most of every penny, nor was I wise about managing my money, although I should have been, after having looked after myself in France.

My first landlady was a little dried up old woman who charged the five of us only thirty shillings each for bed and breakfast in her house in Rose Bay because we shared two large rooms. She came home drunk every night after the pubs closed at six o'clock but was uniformly patient with us. She accepted our loud speech in strange tongues, comings and goings at odd hours and sundry other foreign behaviour not tolerated by subsequent landladies of our later acquaintance. What was more, she was ever helpful and beyond all expectation when I needed her most. Although we had left the Home we continued to learn English after work, from another volunteer teacher, upstairs at the 'Mac'. One night after class we found a wedding reception in progress downstairs, and nobody saying us nay, we gatecrashed and helped ourselves to the liquor laid on there for the guests. For the one and only time in my life I got drunk and was miserably sick all over the old lady's hall and bedroom carpet. She, recognizing a fellow sufferer, cleaned it up, out of the compassion of her experienced heart, without comment.

We knew nothing about her but speculated at odd moments, without foundation, on the kind of tragedy that must have blighted her life. Andrew, the handsome, who could never pass a mirror without admiring himself in it, said that she and her sister must have fallen in love with the same man. I had a suspicion he meant someone like himself, against whom no girl with eyes could remain proof.

"The man went off to the war and was killed and the sisters haven't spoken to each other since," he concluded. Charles disagreed and thought rather that she must have quarrelled with her siblings over the inheritance and turned to the bottle for solace during the course of the ensuing court case. With Charles everything had to have a financial basis. We conjured up these high dramas to account for the lack of telephone calls and visits to her, even though she had been living in safe Australia all her life. Three generations of her relatives had not been killed in the war, so they should have swarmed through the spacious rooms and garden every weekend. It never occurred to any of us that a woman who has lived her long years in her own comfortable home without pogroms, discrimination, deportation or invasion, could simply be alone, just devastatingly lonely.

The living we earned was hard indeed. Who among us had the strength of character to start cooking after a day's work, supposing we had had access to facilities? Without the Society's supplement we couldn't have managed.

My job with the little Scotsman was boring, didn't pay well and I wouldn't have lasted the eight months I did except for Veronica, the machinist, with whom I used to talk a lot, at first stumblingly and later, as my English improved, quite well.

When I finally couldn't stand any more I went to a furrier I'd heard about in the city and asked for a job. Naturally, he wanted to know where I was working and what experience I had. I told him and he rang McLevy for a reference, the gist of which was that I would never make a tradesman because I was left-handed. I didn't get the job.

Emboldened instead of daunted, I called Bs next, one of the leading furriers in town and when I was asked the inevitable questions I said I had just landed from Paris. They took me on at once for double my previous pay. Life assumed a whole new aspect. Since I earned enough to manage on, the Society no longer needed to subsidise me, a state of affairs It had long looked forward to with a glee enhanced by the long delay.

With a large firm I was able to learn about the different furs popular in Sydney, I came in contact with fellow tradesmen and improved my finances too. The first lot of skins I sank my knife into there was pishchaniki. I at first took it to be the name of a Polish nobleman. Not only had I never seen any before, I couldn't even pronounce it, but it wasn't long before I was cutting it with the best of them. A rather flat, brown, imported fur with no special attributes. It was popular for every kind of fur garment. I stayed with Bs for fifteen months and if not for a chic little brunette machinist/finisher who had a dimple in the left corner of her mouth, with whom I established a more meaningful relationship than your basic working one, I would have stayed much longer. Her name was Ida, although I always thought of her as Swift Lift, for she took me directly to seventh heaven, never stopping at in-between levels.

The boss was one of the better known skirt fans of the day himself. He found out about us, called me into his office one morning and propounded the moral code according to B in very plain terms: "I don't care if you screw the entire female population of greater Sydney," (how ever did he find out about my life's true ambition so quickly?) "but leave my staff alone!"

Steve, one of our fivesome in Rose Bay, at once said, "It served you right", when he heard about it. He was a good looking boy though with a tendency to being overweight. He loved food with a passion. "Such a thing will never happen to me," he went on with his usual self-assurance. "We have to keep our eyes on our goal at all times because we have no family to bail us out in case of trouble or set us up if we want to make more of our lives than to remain just wage earners. We have to do it ourselves and that means working hard and saving up, which you can't do if you have no job."

"But that bastard had no business with us," I countered. "He doesn't own us and out of working hours we should be able to do what we like. We never hurt him. It's supposed to be a free country!"

"And so it is! You are free to make love to whomever you choose and he is free to sack whomever he wants to." Steve was from Serbia, a part of Yugoslavia, and was able to converse with all the speakers of the many Slav tongues. This was a sore point with me, in spite of my facility with languages, of which I was then acquiring English as my fourth, because my native Hungarian was only good for talking with other Hungarians.

"When you have my experience in working among a large number of people," he went on, "you'll know that private affairs between workers can create problems for the boss. Fights have been known, not to mention fraud and theft. It's different in a small factory, where there may be four or five workers and the working boss. But, if I have my way, and I don't see why I shouldn't, I'll not have to work much longer in either kind, because I'm not throwing my money away on girls, like you all do. I'm saving up and soon I'll have enough to start out on my own. This is a golden land of opportunity, much more so than America ever was. You can make money here, and I'm going to."

"What will you do with it all by yourself when you get it?" Charles asked, taking the words out of my mouth.

"That's simple," Steve replied. "I'll go to Switzerland, invest it in the bank and collect the interest every month, like every good capitalist."

Steve couldn't know, for it took fifty more years to disclose, the perfidiousness of Swiss banks: how the existence of deposits, millions, was denied to Holocaust survivors because the original depositors had been denounced to the Nazis and the deposits shared between the conspirators in the belief that the moneys would never need to be accounted for. Many other banks, English, American, Dutch, have been discovered to have acted similarly, but they had never been perceived as the quintessence of trustworthiness and reliability that the Swiss had always been.

In those days we were full of convictions on every subject under discussion anywhere, of which ways of moneymaking comprised a large percentage. Our ambition in that respect, as clear before each of us as Steve's, tended to falter however, when a temptress cocked her finger. So when Steve came home, after a weekend with a host family, softened and starry eyed, we were agog to know whether he had really made the sum he had fixed on as enough to start with, and if so how?

"I wouldn't mind seeing the last of him," Andrew blurted out, "I'm sick of his constant boasts and preaching."

The following night Steve could not contain himself any longer and told us what happened. "I went to the Ks straight from work on Friday afternoon. It seemed to take forever on the tram. They live far out, near Coogee Beach, in a nice little house with a big, untidy back yard. My host and hostess introduced themselves and their young son and made me comfortable. They questioned me about how I like chicken prepared and what sort of vegetables I prefer and what's my favourite cake. Mr K is a thin man, I think he has some kind of stomach trouble, but Mrs K is very fond of cooking and you can see it on her. Altogether I had the warmest reception of all the weekends I've ever had and, d'you know, it felt so good. Very quickly, they were not like strangers at all, but like an uncle or cousin.

"Then, at about six o'clock, in came this girl. I don't think she's more than seventeen, plump but not fat, with a blush on her full cheeks and you can see her little teeth all the time because she laughs easily. Her name is Vivienne and she works as a salesgirl in a radio and record shop. She was so tired when she came in, that even I could see it. She is on her feet all day, but she only sat for a minute and then went to help her mother. She's a lovely girl and can already cook everything I like. I'm going out to see her again tomorrow after work."

There went all Steve's plans in one flash of Vivienne's smile. He became the first of us to get married and a finer girl or a better match he couldn't have found had he searched all over Switzerland and Australia and all points in between three times over.

Mr Know It All Peter was the one to suggest that I, not being married to it, should adventure out of the fur trade, so I worked at many different jobs including labeling Pepsi Cola bottles in a glass factory in Zetland and collecting freshly moulded clips in the Railway Workshops in Redfern, both of them shift work, which I liked. I left Zetland because nobody spoke good English and found just one person, a Chinaman, who did, at Redfern!

I was often given the chance to work overtime. I mostly refused at the glass factory because my shift ended late, but usually accepted at the Railway Workshop as I worked the early shift. Not that any extra work was ever produced there with overtime. After the passage of so many years I think I may freely tell tales, especially as most of those practices which so went against my early training are now being addressed. As soon as I agreed to work overtime the foreman told me to, "Disappear a coupla hours, just get lost, will ya!"

The work I would have done was saved to be done during overtime. It was no easy matter to disappear. There were hundreds of workers with the same problem: where to disappear to? The toilets were already full of prospective overtimers and you were not supposed to leave the premises altogether. The place should have had a built in disappearing room, as I told the union representative, when he came to collect my membership and asked how I was going. He didn't think it funny, as I didn't from then on, when I heard about one or other of the more outrageous union demands, which, when not met resulted in our so frequent and well known strikes.

However, this was the Australian way and it wasn't for us, newcomers, to criticise. Not in those days! Because the impossible to answer logic went something like this: "How come, if you lot know all the answers and do everything so perfectly over there, that so many of you are coming over here?" The onflowing smug superiority extended from this logic resulted, in its extreme application, in European professors of medicine for one example, authors of textbooks, having to sit for examinations, set from those same textbooks, before they were allowed to practise here.

Although many official bodies, like groups of parliamentarians or city councillors, regularly went off on overseas study tours, much to our disappointment hardly ever did they institute innovations on their return, or if they did, they were always from tradition-bound England, otherwise referred to as 'Home', even by second generation Aussies, and never from the Continent. When I first got to England, years later, I found out the reason. The mess and inefficiency was so much worse over there that our study groups found nothing to institute when they came home.

My few weeks as a budding dental technician in France, where I learned to melt and pour gold, helped me to understand better the interesting and ingenious process by which the clips were made at the Railway Workshop. The cycle began with wet sand being packed around a ready clip in a wooden frame. The clip was then carefully removed to leave a perfect empty space of itself. This was filled with molten metal through a hole in the cover placed over the top. Hundreds of frames were set out in rows ready for the arrival of a four hundred litre cauldron of molten, hot iron. This rode on a track suspended overhead and tilted over each frame to pour in the required amount, like some overgrown honeyeater dipping over each flower. One man controlled the all important job of pouring. When cool, the ready clips were collected. This was my job. Then the frames were stacked and the sand shovelled up to be used again. It was neither easy nor pleasant work because of the weight of the clips and the heat from the molten metal which caused not only our brows to sweat, but it was ever interesting. In fact the pouring was always exciting, no matter how often I watched it, and balanced the need for the disappearing act.

After work was never dull either. When I wasn't changing jobs I was changing rooms and room mates with almost predictable regularity until the great day when I found a room I could afford on my own at the Cross. Some apartment blocks consisted of single rooms and I no longer needed to account to a landlady, no matter how long-suffering and patient, about the time of my arrival home and with whom. Indeed, my private life resumed being as private in all its aspects as it used to be in the succession of rooms I had inhabited in any of the hundreds of impersonal hotels in Paris where the hotel keeper was not, under law, assumed to be running a bordello if he failed to stand guard over the sexual mores of his tenants, as the landladies were obliged to do here. Subtenants had to be the most morally upright, ethical and sexless people for sheer lack of privacy. When I first heard the derogation, 'your father made you in an alley, standing up', I knew at once where that unfortunate progenitor must have roomed.

This entire matter of sex and the local attitudes to it we considered archaic and not only because of the differences to it in Paris. In France and in many other European countries including Hungary, already in the twenties, prostitutes had been licenced, taxed, protected from pimps and gangs and required to submit to regular, frequent medical checks. They were treated in a civilized practical fashion, considered not much lower than tanners, for example, also low on the social scale, but tolerated as contributors of a needed service to society. Forty years later most of Australia caught up and proved us right, including acceptance of homosexuals, who are now, at last, franchised to be different though equal. For all the bans, human nature being what it is, the Church's demands notwithstanding, there was never less prostitution or other illicit sex going on here. Australia could have matched Hungary baby for illegitimate baby in those pre-pill, pre-Communist days.

It is a still valid truism that there is nothing like living with somebody to get to know them and, of necessity, all that rooming together afforded us intimacy with a large coterie. We are still friends and keep in contact, with many from afar, for destiny has swept G back to Paris, J to Montreal, M to Toronto and H back to Basel, to mention just a few. The aching void left by the drastic amputation of so many of our kin has been assuaged now by our wives and children, but then it was each other we tried, unaware, to graft onto our stumps.

Salamon was the fourth of our Rose Bay five. He was not bad looking but too shy to address any prostitute, although he spent his Saturday afternoons, when he was off work, furtively gazing at them. He needed the stamp of legality to benefit from their services, also an injection of romance. None of this 'wham, bam, thank you Ma'am' for him, and since he was slightly simple he never progressed to a proper relationship with a girl either. He came from Transylvania, from where the Germans deported him together with his parents to Auschwitz. Whether because he was tall for his fourteen years, as he thought, or for some other reason, he was sent to work and not to the gas chamber with his elderly looking parents. Like me, he also landed in Paris after the liberation and graduated as a tailor. He was proud of his speed and prowess with the sewing machine and never lacked well paying work. No-one would have guessed that trouble could result from this but an unhappy incident occurred in his first job in Australia that preyed on his mind evermore.

The presser there was a returned serviceman of around thirty whom everybody called Mac in the Aussie way, instead of MacDonald, which was his proper name. From the beginning he frequently made nasty remarks about Salamon's refugee status. Later when he realised that not all of Salamon's shortcomings were due to lack of English and he was a kike to boot, he jeered about that too. Salamon was on the point of looking for another job many times but we encouraged him to stand his ground, as the holidays were coming and apart from Mac he liked working there. We pointed out that he was liable to come up against that or some other prejudice no matter where else he worked. It was a very sore point, this discovery of animosity in Australians. We hadn't been warned about it. Our fragile, carefully nursed illusions of an open, tolerant society in this free, far country to which we came, were easily shattered. A future here, in the land furthest, both geographically and ideologically, from what we thought to have left behind, had to be uncontaminated by such bigotry, or else we had to face the unbearable fact that we should never have come here. Our defensive illusions had to be erected around us once more, re-mortared and smoothed over quickly. Any data to the contrary had to be buried.

On the first Friday after the holidays Salamon was so late home that we started to worry about him and with one accord sauntered towards the tramstop to await his coming.

"Wait till I tell you what happened", he began before he quite came up to us. "Mac found out that I get paid more than he. He kept muttering to himself, 'How come a retard reffo gets more pay than me? They come here and take the jobs from us and then they get more money!' and things like that. He went on and on until he worked himself up, slammed the iron down, pulled out a pocket knife and held it to the boss' throat.

"'It's not right!' he said, only he was screaming and shouting. 'I didn't fight for this country and suffer for it to have idiot Jew bastards take the bread out of my mouth. You got to give me as much money as him.' And he was holding the boss from behind and sticking this knife at his neck, demanding equal pay with me.

"The boss tried to explain, that machinists are paid at a higher rate than pressers and that's why I get more. He was so frightened that he stuttered. It had nothing to do with where a person was born and he was not discriminating against returned servicemen, he is one himself. But Mac wasn't listening."

Salamon was quite excited telling us the story and we were so interested that we were rooted to the footpath of Wilberforce Avenue not daring to interrupt in case he lost the thread.

"Well, little Maggie, you know, the junior, was sent down to bring his wife. We know she comes to meet Mac every Friday because they live near the factory and they walk home together. Sure enough, Maggie came back quicker than we thought she could have and had Tessy with her.

"She is a nice looking woman. About twenty-five. She had her baby in her arms. A lovely little blond boy smiling and calling out hello to everybody. Mac took one look and calmed down. He let go the boss and sort of collapsed in a heap. His wife took the knife."

Salamon was never shy with us and showed us how Mac had closed the knife and gave it up, and at this ease of tension we restarted our homeward walk.

"She apologised to the boss and looked sort of embarrassed at all of us and then took Mac home, but came back soon after, just at closing time, to apologise especially to me, and told us about him.

"'He never used to be like that,' she said. 'When I married him all my friends envied me. He was fun to be with, always joking and laughing, always the life of the party, but he never drank too much. But since he came back from the war he has changed. He was a prisoner of war with the Japanese. He had been taken prisoner in Singapore. They beat the prisoners and made them work, even when they were sick. And they starved them, so they were sick a lot. Malaria and dysentery and that. He doesn't talk about it. He doesn't talk about anything. He is in a bad mood all the time, doesn't want to go out and hates parties. We never go anywhere and I have to come to meet him otherwise he goes to the pub and gets drunk.'

"She didn't tell it like I'm telling it," Salamon told us. "She talked slow and hesitated about what she was going to say, as if she didn't want to tell us. She even said she hoped she wasn't being disloyal but she said to the boss and to me, 'You're entitled to know.' She was ashamed."

As soon as Salamon mentioned Tessy's shame the atmosphere changed. We knew about the shame of the victim, we suffered from it unknowing, but we never admitted it. Neither would Salamon have verbalised it had he been the full quid. It must have just slipped out in the flow of telling what he heard and saw. We didn't talk much about what we had suffered in the war either. We knew intimately the bare bones of from where and to where each one of us had been taken and whom we had lost. There was no need to elaborate. Thirty years had to pass before I could start writing The Army Cap Boy.

"Did you know that Australian soldiers fought in Singapore and were taken prisoner by the Japanese?" Salamon asked us. "And what the Japanese did to them? Maybe they had it worse than us. Because of the malaria," Salamon finished lamely.

He understood as well, by then, that we knew but didn't want to know. That it was too much already. Such had been the enormity of our own sufferings that no one else's pain could possibly be compared to ours, no matter how bad it had been.

Quite apart from that, we needed an Australia that was innocent and untainted by such things. A place where they were busy with the distance between a girl's two piece suit and where a Changi or a Bergen-Belsen were unknown and where those unspeakable horrors could never ever happen.

Learning English. Mr Brand & Mr Schneider in the background.

3 PARTY TIME.

My move to the Cross didn't mean loss of the companionship of former room mates for many of the other 'boys' had also found affordable and more congenial accommodation in the area, if not in my very building in Orwell Street. We continued to see each other regularly, but in spite of all the Society's efforts in this direction it took some of us longer than Steve to mix with the locals; of course it wasn't mandatory to go to his extent.

Apart from my weekends, my initial entry into Aussie circles was engineered by Madge, whom I had first met one Saturday night at the Trocadero. I was once again back in the fur trade and earning well. The 'Troc', as it was known, and very well known, not only locally but also all over the United States, thanks to the many Yanks who spent the war here, was a large and elegant dance and function hall. It stood in George Street, just south of the Town Hall, until it was pulled down and a quite ordinary but, by then, more profitable Entertainment Centre was built in its place. You were always sure of finding a good jazz band in the best taste, and although not exactly mine, the girls were. I went there as often as to the famous Pekise Club, which was a disco, upstairs in Elizabeth Street, long before the term was invented. There we danced to the latest records from South America, played without patter or interruption. I often took it upon myself to contradict the canard that it mattered not what music was played as you could do no more than sway to the rhythm in close proximity. I am able to state unequivocally that, having lifted it, only once have I been unable to put my foot down again for lack of floorspace during all the many years I went there. Upholstered benches were available along the wall under the windows overlooking Hyde Park and minuscule tables with tiny chairs in the corners. There were several rooms for card

The Picnic
1948

Zoltán & Adi with Auntie
Peggy & Uncle John
Lewinnek

or chess playing as well as a bar where soft drinks were served, and some black liquid which we drank as coffee. The last time I was there, not long before it, too, closed, I paid six shillings, about the price of another of my passions, the movies.

Dancing was a double bill of a different kind: a pleasure for itself and an avenue to the main interest of every waking moment, and sometimes sleeping too – girls. It was a challenge to think up new opening gambits.

"Do you come here often?" was the standard, to which she would answer, "No, this is my first time," even if you have been eyeing each other speculatively across the vast expanses of the Troc floor for the last three months of Saturday nights. It was a new adventure every time. Will she? And if yes, where? Shall I have to escort her home to the cottage sited by her parents, with malice aforethought to me and my ilk, precisely halfway between Woop-Woop and Bullameckenko Stations? These were always located on hilltops. I wondered would I once again pant up to them just as the last train for the city was pulling out? Many of Sydney's further suburbs are ringed with romance in my memory and I could have acquired a thorough knowledge of them over the years if it hadn't always been dark when I went to Padstow and Lidcombe and Maroubra.

Madge was a neatly put together brunette, perhaps a few years older than I but as keen a dancer. After a few turns around the floor she asked me whether I would like to take her to the policemen's ball the following Saturday night as her brother was on the force. It was to be held on the Showboat departing Circular Quay at eight and cruising all over the harbour till midnight.

"There will be a good band and it's formal," she said. "Of course you have to bring your own drink."

I had never been to a ball, not of any kind let alone a policemen's one, and on a boat yet! Shades of merrymaking on the Napoli were conjured on my memory. She saw me hesitate and threw in the added inducement that I needn't go to Croydon, where she lived, to fetch her, she would come in with her brother's party and meet me at the Quay. So we agreed.

The week passed in curious anticipation and I turned up for the date with more than my usual excitement. I had gone to more than the usual expense for the dinner suit hire and a bottle of Penfold's sweet sherry, which I tried to carry inconspicuously under my arm.

The boat was decked out with coloured ribbons and balloons and vases of flowers were tied to the tops of supports, decorative without being obstructive when we would be under way. The tables were covered with starched cloths and matching napkins and each set with a dish of peanuts.

The guests arrived in groups, the men, like me in black, or else light blue or white, dinner jackets and bow ties, their starched white dress shirts gleaming; the ladies in fluffy, ankle length, pastel tulle or stiff taffeta with deep decolletages and long buttoned up gloves. High, stiletto heeled shoes, from which their polished toenails peeped crimson, as if in apoplexy from being squeezed, graced their feet and bore their teetering weight. Faces were rouged and powdered under piled up hair shocked into immobile waves. The ephemeral froth of gowns fluttered like butterflies amongst the flowers festooned about the festive ship. I was almost overawed by the pomp and elegance until I noticed the odd leather overnight bag, or, in most instances a bulging chaff bag, in every male hand. These, immediately unpacked upon arrival on board, contained bottles of beer! Every couple had brought at least two dozen. I was hard put to it to decide whether to pretend that I forgot and hide my contribution for the night or out with my petunia in an onion patch, and, in an agony of embarrassment bring out my lone bottle of wine. I chose the latter course. If I am to be damned, let it be not for what I failed to do but for what I did, every time.

The moorings were cast off, the band struck up, the waiters started to fly among the tables serving freshly roasted chickens trailing their appetising invitation all around. The evening looked set for a good time to be had by all.

Madge's brother George, and his brother in law, Cecil, at our table, and every other male at all the tables, insisted that the beer must be drunk. They were not carting any home. By the time we came opposite the Heads, where the swell from the open sea rocked the boat, empty bottles rolled about the decks everywhere, including the dance floor, where they became a menace.

Whether because of this, or because the men were more interested in drinking – few touched the tasty food – there were only about a dozen of us dancing. My glass was kept hospitably filled, and I did my best, but there was a limit to the number of beers I could consume in any four hour period due to the shortcomings of my upbringing. I offered my sherry with matching hospitality, but was told to, "Put away that plonk".

By eleven most were drunk. The elegant outfits were streaked with spilt beer and vomit as were the tables and decks, reminiscent of the Napoli during the worst storms, but without the quick, willing hands to clean up. Only offers of more beer and orders to drink up. My glass was refilled whether I needed it or not, on the grounds that it was flat. The wine bottle still stood intact.

Madge and I were dancing when we again crossed in front of the Heads on our way back. I saw, over her shoulder, from too far away for rescue, my bottle rock, topple, fall, break and make its contribution to the general ruin, so I too, was spared, providentially, the 'humiliation' that seemed to attach to 'carting it home'.

All for the want of a properly licenced bar!

Not until many years later were non-Aboriginal Australians considered mature enough to be served drink after six o'clock. At first until ten at night and subsequently till later still. In the meantime exactly those conditions were created which the laws sought to eliminate. Accusations of conspiracy between the brewers and lawmakers were often voiced just as they now are regarding drug barons. I dismissed them because I couldn't see where it would profit them. Surely, the longer the drinking hours the more beer got drunk.

I learned later to what extent Australia's short history was bound up with alcohol. It was currency of the realm for a time. Drinking became a cultural tradition. Against this my Continental Jewish one, according to which you got drunk at most once a year, came up with such a thud that night for the first time.

Madge neither commented nor apologised for the state of her male companions, just declined my offer to see her home by assuring me that George (the policeman, for G-d's sake) would drive them.

I mumbled, "I'm looking forward to it," when she said, "Tata, I had a really good time. See you at the Troc next Saturday?" I looked at George and hoped with all my anxious heart that it should not be sooner, in some accident ward. The connection between alcohol and the sharply rising number of road accidents was just beginning to be publicised, but there was little for drunk drivers to fear from the law. Magistrates were loath to hand down heavy fines for a crime that everybody around them, including themselves, habitually committed. George and his fellow policemen could celebrate *ad nauseam,* (!) and drive confidently home as long as they could find the ignition, for no colleague would dob them in even if inadvertently caught.

In my village the daily prayer to keep us far from the gendarmes was tacit in the *Shema* of the Jews and the *Pater Noster* of the Christians. The regional, executive arm of the law was universally feared and despised for its cruelty and ignorance. However, the policemen in the capital were generally respected, as well as feared, even by the Jews whom it fell to their lot sometimes to escort to the cattle trucks or ghetto, according to orders, when the time came. Later testimony attested that they were mostly as decent as the situation allowed. They lost stature in my eyes when I saw a police officer stand idly by while Arrow Cross Youth and German soldiers looted, but restored wearers of the blue uniform to their rightful pedestal upon arrival in Australia, where I thought them innocent of all wrongdoing.

Nearly half a century later it is common knowledge that the Aborigines of Australia were badly treated in the years up to the sixties. They were escorted into compounds and separated from their children, humiliated and degraded, by an arm of the law not always as decent as the situation allowed. Of course I didn't know about that then, nor about the entrenched corruption and uncurbed racist attitudes, right through the ranks, although rumours abounded. I disbelieved the stories about the force, no matter how unimpeachable the source. Since I personally didn't experience harm I was able to dismiss certain incidents as 'isolated'. Some illusions are like a lifebelt – you have to hang on to them or drown.

Holiday times, especially Christmas, are well known as the worst for the solitary. I didn't know this as my second Christmas in Australia approached, but Jinny, a finisher I worked with, may have had an inkling, very prescient of her if so, as I never mentioned my nightmares to a soul. She extended a warm invitation to spend the day with her and her large, close-knit family.

"Everybody comes, my parents, my parents-in-law, uncles, aunts and cousins from every side. Do come, Jack," she said.

"So what do you want with an extra?"

"One more will make no difference," she pressed as we left the factory for the last time in nineteen forty-nine, for our two weeks' holidays. "It'll be a new experience for you, I'm sure you'll enjoy it. We'll just put an extra sav on the barbie. Do come."

"Oh, I'm sure I'll love it. Perhaps I'll be able to help you. It must be a lot of work to prepare for all those people," I offered.

"Yes, that'll be good, come about 11.30 then. We'll be expecting you."

I took careful note of the address and instructions of how to get there, for fear of a repetition of an early experience, although, by this time I spoke quite well, you never knew what would turn up. Soon after arrival to Australia I had been invited to dinner, got on the tram and handed the conductor what I thought was a two shilling piece. To my consternation, I received a schoolchild's penny ticket. I didn't know, could neither ask nor argue, as to the value of the coin or the limit of the ticket, so got off at the next stop and went home, as the only solution, leaving my hostess to think the worst of foreigner's manners.

Jinny had two little daughters, both of them red haired and freckled like their mother. They attended kindergarten while Jinny worked. She was a talkative, friendly woman in her late twenties, with whom I gladly chatted, being a bit of a chinwagger myself. At first I did more listening but as my English improved I was able to answer her questions about the times I had had, without going into too much detail of the horrors, and what it had been like in Europe.

It was a glorious Sydney summer morning when I set out. I regretted the whole deal as I made my way to Jinny's house with a few toys, a box of chocolates, and, remembering the ball fiasco, not wine but cold beer, under my arm. (I still didn't save myself all embarrassment: I wore my blue suit and tie.) The beach would have been a much better place and those of my friends who were not still asleep could surely be found there.

Front, side and back garden were already full. Children ran amongst the adults, playing with their new toys and showing them off. Men in shorts and sport shirts were standing in groups smoking and drinking and women were offering nuts and crisps and bustling in and out with plates, tablecloths and the myriad odds and ends that seem necessary for what purports to be a simple, rustic meal outdoors for the purpose of cutting down on work. Just the night before I had heard the joke about the new immigrants who had made it. After a barbecue meal the husband, replete with food, says to his wife, "You know Fanny, when we first arrived and were poor, we had the kitchen inside and the dunny outside but now, after all our hard work we could afford to build a proper bathroom and barbecue so now we can eat outside and shit inside."

Jinny carted me around from group to group and introduced me. If they spoke distinctly I had no trouble in following the conversation, a big step in my learning process. I drifted around from clump to clump and lingered to catch the drift of talk, but was basically on the outer, though I tried to join in and mix. Jinny came around every now and then and asked whether I was all right, but couldn't linger as one or other of the children, if not an adult, claimed her attention. She had a large tray on her arm from which she was offering snacks. In the meantime the fire died down to hot coals and the steaks, chops and sausages were thrown on to exude that unmistakable, mouthwatering self-advertisement. The children soon had their hands and mouths filled with sausages and chips and then it was our turn. Several different platters and bowls were set out for self-service, containing foods new to me, to whom lettuce leaves, tomatoes or cucumbers constituted salad; whoever heard of apples and nuts, not to mention raw celery. It was reputed to be full of some kind of poisonous acid! But I had come to do as the Romans, and I firmly believe in treating food with the respect it merits and not rude refusal. The meat was slightly charred on the edges and seared on the outside, giving rise to my suspicious mistrust, but proved juicy and tender inside. I was instantly converted to a barbecue fan and thoroughly agreed with Geoffrey, Jinny's husband that this sort of fare was far preferable for a Christmas dinner on a hot day, such as we were having, to the traditional roast stuffed turkey and trimmings, although I had never yet had the privilege of acquaintance with those. A hush fell on the garden as mouths were otherwise occupied, except for an occasional mild reproof to the children, who seemed unaffected by heat and possessed of an inexhaustible energy supply. I witnessed a patient, permissive method of parenting completely opposed to what I had always experienced and observed.

Christmas cakes and hot puddings with custard and tea – not the pale gold liquid made by throwing a pinch of leaves into boiling water that we drank when suffering from a cold or flu', but Australian tea, of which I had become very fond, with a teaspoonful per person and one for the pot – completed the meal, or rather, the feast. I had promised to help with the preparation, but would only have been in the way, so I now started to gather the dirty cutlery and plates but soon noticed that I was the only male doing it so I stopped. In his largely servantless household, unlike Continentals, who considered all housework exclusively women's, the Aussie husband helped his wife with the washing up after dinner every night, but was not to be caught doing it. On the other hand, traditionally, making the fire, cooking the meat and cleaning the barbecue afterwards – still glowing and so too hot to handle for some hours yet – was a male prerogative, usually the host's. On this, my first barbecue, I observed and tried to minimise my mistakes.

Just like the strictly orthodox Jews, to my surprise, Jinny's guests segregated into male and female enclaves after the meal.

Later I realised that the phenomenon was general practice in Australia, and the subject of much discussion. The conclusions as to cause were as diverse as the students of it, probably all correct to some extent, but mine remains the same as revealed to me that afternoon when I roamed from one knot to the other, out of place in almost all, that the subjects discussed naturally govern who is attracted. (Adi's suggestion that it's a leftover from when the ladies used to withdraw after dinner may have some merit but she was a mere probability of a promise in the bosom of my future at the time.) Women's interests ranged from fashion through cooking to child rearing mainly, with dollops of royal doings thrown in, while the men's were sport, economics, sport, politics and sport: mostly racing, tennis and cricket, since it was high summer.

Australia did exceptionally well in international sport generally and in tennis so well that the Davis Cup was coming to be considered Australia's own. Although not a player myself, I love it too, and live in hopes of our restoration to tennis glory, which must re-establish the prestige and standing Australia merits on the international scene.

On my third circuit of the garden I stopped at my host's group just as he was talking.

"We deserved to lose," he was saying, referring to the recent elections in which the Labor Party lost by a landslide.

"No Labor Party can bring the army in to break the coalminer's strike and hope to remain in office."

"What else was he going to do? There was no way around it," Jinny's father answered him. "People sat in their rooms in the middle of winter, a severe winter, I'll remind you, without enough electricity or gas for cooking and heating. There wasn't even enough for light. That's when your union decided to strike."

"Just let me ask you, if you were the union, when would you strike, eh?" Geoff countered.

"Well, not so soon after the terrible war we've had with all its shortages, which are not over yet."

"They'll be over now, in a week, you'll see. The coupons have been wiped, the prices will be freed. You can buy as much as you want of anything right now."

He took a drink of his beer and put the glass down with a thump to convince us of what he wasn't so happy about himself, being a Labor supporter at heart.

"You'll be telling me next that you like Menzies and Fadden," Jinny's father taunted.

"Better than Evatt, the Commo, or Calwell, who wants to fill Australia with all the no-hopers from Europe; the beggar dagos, the Fascists from Germany and the wandering Jews. Not enough that we had to go over there to rescue them all from Hitler, not enough that we send them food parcels by the shipload, we now have to pay the Poms' fares as well so they can do us the kindness of coming here to take our jobs and homes. They can all stay home for me."

"In that case the Yanks will have to turn around and come here again to rescue us from the Asians," Jinny's father said. "How long do you think the seven million of us can hold out against their hundreds of millions?"

"Yeah, I reckon Calwell is right in that," Geoff's uncle joined in. "We need the people, otherwise this empty land will be too much of a temptation for our neighbours to the north. Twenty million will fit in here, no trouble, and that'll present a different picture altogether."

"What are you talking about?" Geoffrey asked. "You've got to be joking! Twenty million. That'll take a hundred years. In that time they can overrun us a dozen times. Besides, we can't be overrun so easily. Our best defence is the distance between us and them. This is not an English Channel here, you know. Even the birds find it a long hop."

"Oh, there is no defence in distance today, and it'll be even less so in the future, with the planes coming more and more into use, and getting bigger and faster," the uncle said.

"Of course you'd know about that from your vast experience in the navy," Geoffrey remarked with sarcasm.

"You didn't have to be in the air force to know, even Blind Freddy can see the trend, and it won't be long before everybody will travel in planes and not in ships."

"Let me tell you, the migrants are not taking anybody's job, no matter what you say. With their coming they are creating more work," Jinny's father put in. "There'll be more work than ever, and there is plenty already."

"Ah, you're just spouting what Calwell and the other politicians tell you. And the more fool you to believe them. How can their coming make more work? Tell me that!"

Jinny's father had started rolling a cigarette. He looked up at Geoffrey, calmly licked and stuck his creation, lit it and took that comforting first drag.

"The trouble with you Geoff is, you're still back in the depression when the migrant men came by themselves. There were precious few jobs for any of us and they took whatever they could get. But now they come with their families. That means houses, roads have to be built, schools for their kids, and hospitals too, which have to be staffed. That means more nurses, cooks, teachers, you name it and we'll need more of it. They all need to eat. More beef, more butchers." He went back to his cigarette with satisfaction.

The fourth man in the group, his name was Charlie, was only a little older than I. He had wanted to put in his bit too, but had had no chance up to then, and took up the previous subject as a little silence fell. "You said the beggars and Nazis come, Geoff. That's not right. It takes a lot of courage to kick up your home and start again in a far off, strange place. These people are the most enterprising, not the scum. I hear them talking at work. They're ambitious. Not for a few shillings raise, but to start out for themselves. They don't care how hard they work. We'll be working for them in a few years, if we don't look out. They'll be the bosses, and good luck to them," he finished, raising his glass to me.

His gesture brought everyone's attention to my presence. I feared that Geoffrey would become uncomfortable because of what he said about the immigrants when he realised that I had been listening, but if he was, he didn't show it. I had come across this ability many times, to dissociate the present representative of a group a person was decrying. Sometimes they even said, 'present company excepted'.

They seemed to imply that the group, in my case emigrants/refugees/Jews, may be guilty of whatever it was, but you, by virtue of being here with us, are personally exempt. Also, and I found out about this attitude only later, a man in his own house felt entitled to express his opinions freely and without need to pussyfoot around anybody's feelings, no matter whose. The Hungarian tactfulness of: 'In the hearing of a hanged man's family don't mention rope,' was unknown. I didn't take it as rudeness. Not even a lack of tact. If anything, their reason of bringing the migrants for the sake of Australia's interests, and not the purely humanitarian one of providing a haven for the unfortunate, hurt me more. From a politician's mouth you expected proof of benefit to the voters. I didn't mind being useful to Australia while I found my refuge and healing here. On the contrary. I feel that a deal is no good whatever unless both parties benefit and benefit equally. But stated the way it was, coupled to those derogatory attitudes, it sounded like exploitation of the already deprived.

The opinions I heard expressed at Jinny's barbecue were fairly representative of the general public. The only surprise was the absence of bad language, not even one 'bloody', so much a part of every sentence uttered in exclusively male company. I realised that it was in deference to the ladies and children, within earshot. It was an uncouth Aussie indeed who let fly with as much as an innocuous 'damn' under these conditions, unless the hammer he was using hit his thumb instead of the nail.

Menzies' Government must have been well aware of the general sentiment against migrants, particularly Jewish ones. However, rather than reverse the immigration policy they augmented it, in conjunction with a successful propaganda program where the despised reffos became desirable New Australians, proving Romeo's Juliet wrong: there's everything in a name. I wish someone would come up with one acceptable all round for the first Australians! Whether Aborigine, Koori or Black, or Whatever, it is found to be offensive by someone. (The Jewish arrivals from the Former Soviet Union are amazed to hear the designation 'Jew' freely bandied about here. In Russia, it's translation, *Zhid*, was always a derogatory term.)

All I saw and experienced at Jinny's that Christmas day came home to me clear and sharp when I started to read the newspapers regularly. Those same values and attitudes could be found expressed in them and the derivation of those of today may be clearly traced back there.

The one area where Australia and I immediately meshed was gambling. I embraced the national pastime with enthusiasm and a fervent hope that it would liberate my body from the 'round eternal' and my soul from the souring that the economizations and renunciations I was forced to practise were sure to cause soon. My father had been long dead, so he couldn't beat me up, as per our sages' advice, when I came home a winner with the usual beginner's luck, on my first try. As a result, I carried on, unreprooved and uncautioned, until the appropriate education was eventually provided, poignantly, one Saturday.

Often, our crowd, or parts of it, collected after work at various spots, there was never any special arrangement. It might have been the Arabian Cafe upstairs in Darlinghurst Road, or opposite, at the Californian Cafe, already a favourite of the Americans during the war, or simply on a street corner, and, exactly as Marty and his mates said in the eponymous film, "What are you doing tonight?" would sound from this one or that one, until somebody suggested poker. We were not fussy as to place, as long as there was a surface, like a table, around which we could sit. The game was exciting and so absorbing that on many a morning we went from the game straight to work. Before I knew what's what, I was spending all my free hours in some dark, smoky hole with cards in one hand and cigarette in the other.

Since none of us made much money we could only afford cheap entertainment. Poker, penny ante, fitted the bill. It must have been one payday night when the suggestion to up the ante to a shilling was voiced, "To make it more interesting and worthwhile."

The first time I availed myself of an S.P. bookie's (illegal) services was after one such session when I took home the pot. The idea that this may be a short cut to a much desired, affluent future illuminated my brain with the speed and brilliance of a starburst, but I quickly found the time-lag between bet and result too long and didn't pursue it. It couldn't compete with baccarat (also illegal) for immediacy: whether of gratification or disappointment.

The School above the Hasty Tasty (an enormous hamburger joint, the only one always open), where the Kingsgate Hotel now stands, was well situated with a clear view in all six directions for early notice of any impending police raid, although whispers abounded that there were other means of timely warning of danger from that source. The doorman soon came to recognise me so I no longer needed to be introduced by a friend. I could go by myself at any time I was feeling lucky.

It was a classy establishment in a large, old fashioned, high-ceilinged room. Soft drinks and sandwiches were provided free to the players, who stood around three sides of a huge table upon which a wooden box reposed, not as big as a coffin, perhaps more like an altar, into which two shillings out of every pound had to be sacrificed – for the School. A game didn't take long as it only involved the dealing of a few cards to whoever played against the house. Everyone else bet either 'in' or 'out' and lost all, or won double – simple enough to work out even in pounds shillings and pence.

My gift with numbers soon helped me realise that it took ten games at about two minutes per game for a pound note to end in the box. But the reality that my wages were bypassing my pocket on their direct way to pay my accumulated debts didn't then penetrate. Nor that my disposition, if not yet my soul, was soured already by the constant need to cadge for loans and the search for inoffensive ways of refusing them to others on the rare occasions when I was in funds. I was afraid of running short at my next turn at the table – a situation I knew for certain to be, like next dinnertime when I would again be hungry, inevitably on its way.

I was waiting for 'just one lucky break' that was all I needed, and I had to last until then, somehow!

It was a well run school where you got an escort home if you won and ten shillings to line your pockets if you went broke, both of which options I had had occasion to take advantage of in my time.

On that Saturday I met Eddy, the expert, on his way to the races at Rosehill. While we were debating whether I should take up his invitation to join him Theo walked up and clinched it by offering to come too, saying he had never been to the races either and felt confident in going with me, hadn't I told him I knew all about horses from back home, where my father always kept one to pull the cart?

It is a longish journey to Rosehill and Eddy entertained us by discussing the merits of the favourites as against some of the long shots. He gave a learned dissertation on the importance of breeding in horses and the sad lack of same in jockeys. Their paternal descent had been called into serious doubt by unlucky punters so many times that the whole subject was fraught with suspicion and innuendo.

In spite of Eddy's assurance that we couldn't lose, I only put ten shillings on any one horse's nose, that is to say, to win. The other option of betting was each way (not "both ends" as I overheard a newcomer in front of me request at the window). Each way meant that I would win whether the horse came in first, second or third, but less money. With my bent for numbers I should have been an accountant or economist, as my nephew, with better opportunities, was to become. I delved into the calculation of odds with relish and also into the recent form of likely horses and what sort of mood they were in and whether they had a good breakfast, evacuated their bowels, and other such snippets of relevant knowledge. It was a shame the information was available only about the mounts and not the riders. I admired the shiny coats, noble lines and elegant gait of my choices at the parade before the race along with the rest of the punters and joined in the general chorus of, 'cripple', 'ran like a wounded donkey', or 'pregnant cow' after it, while the winners jumped for joy and the losers tore their hair – and their tickets – in utter frustration. Me too.

I found myself with only a few coins after the sixth race. Despair always makes me hungry and reckless so I quickly bought an egg roll and a drink and put all my remaining money on Sure Foot, which Eddy assured us stood for Sure Thing. So did Theo.

Sure Foot got away first and secured an excellent position on the rail quite early but must have developed 'stagnation of the lungs' as he entered the straight. He began to lag. I seemed to hear his laboured breathing over the roaring crowd, from where I stood half a mile away and caught myself taking deep breaths to help him, to no avail. He came in seventh in a field of eight.

It takes a smart man to learn from the mistakes of others: you're stupid if you don't learn from your own. A fool never learns. Theo and I walked all the way home from Rosehill to Roslyn Street to the tune of "the last race was the last race for me". Eddy was nowhere to be found.

The walk home was long enough to reassess my progress along the shortcut to wealth that I had tried to take. I couldn't get away from the fact, no matter how I twisted, that whatever it took to become rich by gambling, I did not possess it. I had enjoyed it, but it was strictly for the wealthy, for whom winning or losing made little difference; to whom a loss was a matter of momentary annoyance, and winning was a blood-surging thrill. But when a loss meant no money for rent or food, or, what was the worst indignity, a debt, no thrill was exciting enough to be worth that. It was like the time I was going to be a black market baron, I was lucky to have escaped becoming either a parasite or a sucker.

I worked hard and honestly for the money I earned. I was entitled to enjoy its fruits and so was the other fellow, whose money I would have won, to his. I had given it my best shot and instead of rich I got poor quick, even to the loss of self respect, reputation and dignity along with my money. If I didn't finish up in the gutter, I was teetering on the rim, with my ethics, if not yet my clothes, frayed at the edges. My family, and I now include Fatman, my mentor in Bergen-Belsen, would have been ashamed of me.

4 MILDURA.

It was because I had known it well from the past that I shunned poverty so assiduously. In my childhood we were not quite poverty stricken but always under threat of it overtaking us. We escaped only by my mother's constant care and imaginative management. The sight of a workman with his little girl in front of a Budapest ice-cream parlour in 1972, brought the memories of it back to me again vividly. They stopped, he reached into his pocket and carefully counted the fished up contents into his other palm. He repocketed the money with an involuntary shake of his head and they walked on. They were too far for me to catch up with them, even if I had been able to think of a tactful way to play the fairy godfather, which I had a mind to do seeing that the man looked less than forty – too young to have been one of the Arrow Cross hoodlums of '44. (This immediate calculation of any non-Jewish Hungarian or German's age whom we come across seems to have become automatic with us, survivors.)

By around Burwood on the long way back from Rosehill I reminded myself that I had coped in Paris after my penniless return from Hungary and bolstered myself against galloping despair by repeating that I would cope again. Theo's thoughts must have run the same way. He recalled when he used to get up at five in the morning throughout his childhood, rain, shine or snow, mostly snow, for they lived in the lower Carpathians, and go on egg buying rounds of the neighbourhood before *cheder*, (religious school). This was his contribution to his large family's meager finances. He didn't need to elaborate, I knew those bone-wringing dawns intimately from my own trudges to the seat of Jewish learning, which in our village was a tiny annex to the synagogue where the tutor waited with the Book (of which we are the people) in one hand and the cane in the other. James

Joyce's paddle wielding Fathers had nothing on our teacher.

At round about Stanmore I reciprocated in my turn with the story of how Paul, Tibor and I had subsisted on cherries in Besançon in the spring of '48, until we managed to wangle our way back to Paris – and Theo and I, sore footed, totally broke but our morale mending, made our way back to our King's Cross digs.

"Unfortunately there are no more cherries, the season is finished," Theo said.

That was so, but there were grapes. I happened to run into him a few days later in Castlereagh Street and he hailed me with great excitement.

"Guess what?" he asked, and went on without waiting. "I'm off to the country! I lost my job and the Employment Officer I went to suggested I should go. To pick grapes. You don't need experience and you have to pay your fare only to Albury, they pay the rest. It's in a place called Mildura, on the Victoria-New South Wales border, but the train doesn't go direct. You have to go to Melbourne and take another train from there so you get to see it twice, on the way over and on the way back too. Why don't you come with me? I've been told a team of two can make more than one alone."

I had quite a good job but was in the throes of debt and smarting from my gambling. In hindsight it is possible to analyse coolly, detachedly, the effect this internal parasite had on me. Since it is my discovery, I shall take the privilege of naming it Hazard. It is a species of the large genera of smart parasites. Smart, because they do not kill their host outright, at least, not often. The host's death means death to the inhabiting parasite as well. Smart because the host is fooled into finding every kind of subterfuge to deny, and to continue to deny, even in the face of irrefutable facts, that there is a problem at all. Just like any alien gloop of classical science fiction Hazard insidiously invades the brain and takes over, until the host becomes utterly converted to its Belief System. This states that preknowledge of which horse out of twenty-eight will stick his nose past the post a whisker ahead of another proves the host's complete superiority of judgement to the whole world but especially to the host's father, who always said the host would never amount to anything. The Belief System has a contingency plan for loss as well, as it must. It brings on the fever stage whereby the sufferer becomes convinced that not bad judgement, this time, but bad luck was the cause. This bad luck is actually the toxin generated by Hazard (hence beginner's luck, during the period before the toxin develops). The result is a degradation of the ego, a feeling of moral worthlessness, not only because Hazard manages to link financial worth with personal worth but also because penury, as a simple condition, brought on by anything at all, is hard enough to bear, let alone when caused by oneself. The mix is totally demoralizing

A change of scene was tempting. It would help in putting it all behind me. Also, it would give me a chance to see more of this vast country. My introduction to trains: the first, at thirteen, sad, because I was leaving home, and the second, the 'Bergen-Belsen Special' which still gives me nightmares, failed to curb my love of travel. I had planned to do it first thing with the money I was to have made on the cards and horses. I went to the Employment Office with Theo immediately. Two days later he found himself another, local, job and cancelled his trip. I went alone.

The journey was enjoyable and exciting from beginning to end although uncomfortable on the wooden bench of second class for fifteen hours. I hardly closed my eyes all the way, not even at night, because I didn't want to miss any of the fantastic open scenery, the rocks protruding from the soil on the steep mountainsides, the stark, solitary, often dead, trees in the middle of huge paddocks, eerie in the moonlight, the skyline of rounded hills, like overlapping breasts, disappearing behind, only to be replaced by fresh ones in front, interminably. It was so different to what I had ever seen. I looked out for kangaroos hopping about free but missed out. They were no more to be seen here than in Pitt Street! (Even now, the occasional sight of a grazing or upright 'roo by the roadside on our car travels still has the power to galvanise my spirit.)

All had to change at Albury at dawn because the track widths varied in the different States. I didn't want to believe it and thought my neighbour was pulling a new-chum's leg, (again) a pastime Aussies are much addicted to, when he told me it was due to the early settler's fears of enmity between the States. The railways had been deliberately built like that to make it easier to defend Victoria, should marauding hordes of New South Welshmen suddenly swoop. Pride distinctly resonated in his voice when he boasted of how much trouble the thing had caused during the war, when goods urgently wanted could only go by rail due to the petrol shortage and every item had to be labouriously transferred at every state border. The job was done by newly arrived refugees from Axis countries, reclassified from their former status of enemy aliens, and allowed to join up but not trusted in other, more sensitive spheres, nor to fight overseas, no matter how keen they were to go. Adi's Uncle Feri acquired his bad back there, lugging sacks of flour and boxes of ammunition and boasted of it ever after. There was always talk of standardization, for even in peacetime it was a costly nuisance, but the issue was shelved for lack of finance for another twenty years.

I visited the sights of Melbourne in the few hours between trains, particularly the famous Myers Stores, which we didn't have in Sydney. I loyally decided that they had nothing on our David Jones.

Mildura immediately impressed as a busy, open and spacious country centre well situated on the banks of the Murray River, which forms the border between New South Wales and Victoria for a large part of its extensive length.

Theo had heard correctly. Fruitpicking was best, and therefore mostly, done in teams of families or groups of friends. It was seasonal, well paid work. Since I was by myself I was made a tractor driver on special terms. I was paid by the day, whether it rained or shone, and made better money for lighter and more congenial work than I could have made picking without a partner.

There was decent accommodation with shower cubicles and toilets, in a building separate from, but near, the owner's house, where we had our meals, cooked by his wife in their large kitchen. We had steak with eggs and two vegetables for our main meals, well and freshly prepared and properly presented at cloth covered tables in a jovial and friendly atmosphere. For breakfast you could have eggs only – in those pre-heart disease days - or just cereal, if that was your bent. Given the nature of the physical labour, you were expected to have a large appetite and nothing was stinted, unlike at Vista Mare.

This was a boarding house where I had found lodging after a losing bout with yet another landlady (not the sock washing, that came later) and where the good news about the full board was that there was little of it. It would have been useless to complain, I would have just been shown the door. Such were the shortages of accommodation that the place was always full. According to rumour the owner founded his fortune there, which (there is justice!) he later lost on Tasmanex shares.

Pickers were paid by the bucket. This was a special, square, metal container with a colander-like bottom, into which the grapes were collected. So pay depended not only on your picking skill but also on the richness or otherwise of the crop. There were always poor patches where it took longer to fill the bucket. The pickers brought their full buckets and fitted them into the removable frame on the trailer which I pulled with my tractor.

I drove along to keep pace with them so as to allow the least distance between us. When the trailer was fully loaded with buckets I drove into the shed where the frame with the buckets was lifted off by means of a block and tackle, and lowered into a dip for a few minutes and then hoisted up again. The boss' son, Bill, handled the dip and the racks. The grapes drained through the holes in the bottoms of the buckets and then were tipped out onto drying racks where they stayed until they turned themselves into delectable raisins, sultanas or currants, according to kind, out of sheer eagerness to become Christmas puddings.

Wine grapes were grown elsewhere, but not in great quantities, for it would be another twenty years before the influx of plonk-drinking reffos and their offspring gave the necessary impetus to the local viticulture that was to turn it into the internationally renowned one it has become. In my village the grapes were picked into baskets from where they were transferred into carts on their way to the treaders. The new wine flowed almost instantaneously, entirely without mechanization.

Our boss deducted a few pounds for board but kept the rest of our pay also.

"You might get robbed in the dormitory. There are no lockers, you see," he told us by way of explanation.

It was generally agreed that what he really feared was our going off to town on a binge, or taking off altogether before his vines were picked. Either eventuality was a real possibility with the general run of pickers, and to him both of equal anathema.

There were eight of us, all of an age, and all from Melbourne except me, picking for him. They were healthy, strong boys, easy to get on with and I enjoyed their company, but I got into trouble with them every day anew.

When we knocked off at four thirty the boss used to take us to the pub in Redcliff, the nearest town, to have a few beers. The idea was to drink fast as the six o'clock closing time was scrupulously observed. To this end nothing less than schooners could come into consideration for us, thirsty, real-man types. The first of these oversized glasses was very welcome after a day spent in the blazing sun, breathing the fine, dry dust of midsummer mid-Australia, followed by a drive ditto, with six of us in the back of the ute.

Any number of English, Dutch, even Germans, will waste their time claiming that their beer is purer, stronger, better, and is better for you. They can say what they like. I know that there is nothing like that 'golden, liquid ambrosia with a suggestion of bitter, that slightly tangy, cooling, comforting nectar that every body-cell yearns for like the parched earth yearns for rain, as it comes ice cold from the depths of the counter, with a head on just so', that you get in any Aussie pub. The first schooner that is. With that inside me I had had both enough and the maximum I could accommodate. There was simply no room for one more drop, let alone the many further schooners I was expected to put away when the rest of us 'shouted', each in turn.

I made friends with Bill, the boss' son and Malcolm, an engineering student at Melbourne University, also hung around with us. Bill was a quiet sort, a bit like Salamon, somewhat slow on the uptake and good natured. He told me about the country round about, which he loved, and what it was like to live there.

"We only keep people at picking time," he said. "During the year we manage with just ourselves and the neighbours' help. We help each other."

"What is there to do after work?" I asked.

"Oh, we put on barbecues and sometimes there's a dance or somebody's father gets generous with the car and we ride up and down. Or, there's always the pictures."

Malcolm was more like Peter, an intellectual, interested in most things and punctilious in his manners. This was his third season of fruit picking. He loved working in the country but not with animals. He wouldn't even pet a cat in case it had fleas or worms.

One Saturday afternoon the three of us stayed in town. The shops were closed and the wide streets deserted except near the pub, where we could still see a few upright figures swaying aimlessly along, and many horizontal ones motionless where they dropped across the footpath, in the gutter, or right in the roadway. They had done what our boss did his best to prevent us doing. They had splurged their pay on a binge and, Bill assured me, would finish their entertainment in jail. The police car ran a shuttle. The 'drunk in a public place' charge was vigorously prosecuted.

As the first law of commerce states: there is always someone to supply a demand. In spite of the ban which then prevailed on selling them alcohol, some of the figures were Aborigines. Not until years later was a doctor to research the effects of the impact of alcohol on a people to whom it was entirely foreign and who were therefore quite unequipped in their bodily makeup to metabolize it. In spite of his convincing conclusions nothing was done to educate us, neither the Aborigines nor the rest of Australians, about the disastrous results of this in heart attacks, diabetes and intractable alcoholism with all its ills, in even the quite young.

Still in the old days when we had roomed together in Rose Bay, Peter introduced me to a Hungarian anthropologist of his acquaintance, who had lived for a long time with Aborigines, both 'in the wild' and 'civilized'. He spoke easily and respectfully about their lifestyle and culture to us, who were astonished to hear that they had one. I, like everybody else I had ever spoken to on the subject until then, thought them primitive and dismissed them as savages. The anthropologist explained that humans live in social groups which necessitates laws and an authority to administer them, from whence the rest of the beliefs and usages of society flows. I found out that the Aborigines were no exception, and that their culture, vastly different from ours though it be, was nevertheless ancient, functional and effective, as proved by their having survived, even flourished, until the white invasion. I learned, for example, that each newborn was allocated into a clan according to his parentage in such a way as to preclude inbreeding, that the concept of private property was considered absurd and therefore they shared what they had, according to a certain order of precedence. Also, that their beliefs were bound up with their tribal land and its features, flora and fauna. It was all interwoven into how it all came to be in ancient times. They taught this to their children patiently and painstakingly. Neither paddles nor canes were used. Also, they arranged a ceremony for their boys at about the age of thirteen that was as near a *brith milah* (circumcision) and *bar mitzvah* (initiation) combined as you could get.

In Redcliff I saw my first live Aborigine.

"They're no good," Bill said as we were walking home. "They're lazy and useless. You can't get them to work. Believe me, we've tried, I've even hit one once to try and make him see sense, after I'd explained ten times how urgently we needed the work done, without getting anywhere. If by any chance they do work a day, they pick up their pay in the evening and that's the last you've seen of them."

"Yes," Malcolm agreed. "They're nothing but a pain. They don't want to work and they don't want to learn. They won't assimilate. All they want is for the rest of us to keep them, to give them houses and money and the right to drink in bars so they can get drunk and not go to jail."

These were exactly the same words 'we Hungarians' used to use about the Gypsies in my village who were allowed to drink and lived the way they did by choice. Whereas, from their life of choice the Aborigines had been forcibly plucked, to be pushed, without 'if you please', into an alien civilization.

"Do you really think a white drunk is any different?" I asked. There was no answer, as there couldn't be, with the evidence right there before us. "And you're wrong," I went on. "That's not what they want at all. They don't want houses. If anybody should happen to die in one you'll never get them to set foot in it any more! Most of all they don't want to assimilate to our lifestyle. What they want is to be allowed to continue as they did in the past, with their past. They were never used to work as we know it, for a day or a week, at some boring, repetitious, incomprehensible job for money, then go to the shops for their groceries. They were happy going shopping with a boomerang and took the kangaroo home for a feast if they hit one. They lived their free lives for thousands. . . ."

"You bloody jumped up little reffo, what makes you such an expert on our Abos?" Malcolm shouted, interrupting me, jolted out of his usual good manners by my tirade. Bill would have interrupted before, I saw him form the words with his lips but he couldn't get a word in.

I told him I was no expert, but could recognize wrong when I fell over it. I said I was a reffo exactly because of a system where oppression of anyone different, not assimilated, was justified by just such phrases as: 'they're dirty, lazy, useless, not willing to assimilate or conform to us' and that it led to hell.

"What are you talking about?" Bill asked.

"I'm talking about this country," I said. I'm afraid I forgot every lesson of what not to and how not to, in my agitation, and raised my voice and waved my arms passionately.

"Ever since I arrived I've been told that here every idea is devoted to the welfare of the individual and it is every individual's inborn right to have a 'fair go'. Shouldn't that include the Abos too? Aren't they everybody? They should have an area of their own in this vast land where they can set up their own state and govern themselves and live according to . . ." but was again interrupted, this time by Bill, who wanted to know whether I had gone completely crazy.

"They can't govern themselves as individuals as far as the pub and back to the river bank where they camp, how would they manage a state? There is banking and welfare and police and hospitals to run. They would just get drunk on the first bottle of plonk they got hold of and stay drunk from then on. It takes them three days to sober up when they're forced to!"

I had to agree, but asked in my turn whether it wasn't up to us, since we had given them the poison, to find the remedy as well? I told them about the ball I had been to and all the drunks there, no prettier sight than the gutters of Radcliff. It made no difference white or brown, elegant policemen or down and outs. We were no saintly examples and should not hustle anybody to emulate us.

Malcolm, having regained his manners, said that although it was easy for someone to come in and criticise, no better solution had been found than the ones being tried or practised. Bill claimed that his father's idea of castrating every male, so the people should die out within a short time, should have been tried. On this I got into a fury and expressed my regret that the same treatment had not been applied to his grandfather, which would have done a favour to his grandmother and all posterity at one stroke. He was insulted and called me a bloody commo and warned me that he would tell his father what I said.

He did too, but must have phrased it without malice, for his mother, whom I admired for the way she cooked for us besides her other work, in spite of her diabetes, dished up my breakfast with her usual good humour next morning, and all the boss said was: “What makes you so knowing about the Abos?” and never held it against me. We agreed to continue the debate with Malcolm but never got around to it. I was relieved to find that Mr. Schneider had been right. You could express your opinion here freely, without having to pack up and leave. On the contrary, I was asked to return for the next season and Malcolm also suggested that I should join his team for six more weeks of grape picking nearby, in South Australia, but I declined with thanks. I agreed with Gerschwin’s Sportin’ Life: ‘Who calls that livin’ where no gels are given ?’

Upon later rumination I found it remarkable that ‘reffo’ and ‘commo’ should have been the epithets thrown at me as the most insulting. The first task the newly elected Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, undertook in government was to ban the Communist Party in Australia. This he failed to accomplish but in the process many party members and sympathisers were most undemocratically hounded, dragged into police stations and questioned at dawn, among them my poor friend, ‘reffo’ Leslie, who, instead of finding refuge here after all his sufferings, was finally tipped over the edge into insanity by that treatment. I never joined any party, so escaped, but was a commo right enough, till the great disillusionment, when some of the facts about Stalin leaked out, proving myself both kind and clever according to the saying which states that if you’re not a communist under twenty you’re heartless and if you still are one after twenty you’re brainless.

About a year later I worked with an Aborigine called Rob, in a factory where we made kangaroo fur purses. He was thirty-five years old, of solid build and could have been a boxer. His chest and arms bulged with muscles and his thighs were solid like the piers in front of the decrepit house in which he lived with his wife, Barbara, and ten year old son, in Eveleigh Street Redfern, the worst slum in Sydney. He could run up two flights of stairs with a hundred pound bundle of skins without being winded. One morning he didn't appear. We were not left to wonder for long. Barbara came for the money owing to him and told us, amid tears, that he had had a heart attack and died the night before, one of the first of the subsequent 'epidemic' of such deaths that raged among young and old indiscriminately. She gave the boss her new address, for she moved her family out of the doomed house at once, according to custom. Their boy was a bright, hard working student, determined to give the lie to the often heard accusations of laziness and stupidity levelled against his people. He had my sympathy and understanding, for it had been the same in my school where I had been despised just for being 'other' and no matter how well I knew my work the teacher found some reason and means to ridicule and castigate me.

Today the population of Eveleigh Street has increased greatly since then. Sadly, there has been no improvement in their living conditions although Aborigine students find greater acceptance by fellow students in class.

Many events have come to light of late from the two hundred years' relationship between the first and latter day Australians, ranging from simple, well meaning misunderstanding to serious crime, even as late as into the mid-sixties, all of it arising from the kind of perception typified by Malcolm, Bill and his father, so akin to the perception we Jews have smarted under for ten times that long. Adi, who believes in Him, says G-d lumped us all in with each other, with whomever we would find it the most difficult to get along, on purpose – His. It is my suspicion that she formulated this theory on the basis of our marriage, that of two extremes. No matter what issue you care to name we adhere to opposing views on it.

I am still convinced that allowing the first Australians their own way and pace into the current era out of a secure home base where they are able to live according to their own ancient usages is the best method. I don't guarantee a smooth passage, but then, how many of us have that? Like the ones in the joke, who were lucky enough not to have been born, not one in a million!

I am no longer alone in this opinion, nor am I called crazy for holding it any more. It is certain that the Aborigines themselves are the most capable of solving their own problems, better than any solution that is forcibly foisted on them from outside and it is up to us now to provide the means since we were the means of the original problem.

On my way back to Sydney I again had a few hours in Melbourne between trains. I meant to do some serious shopping with my bankroll, the most money I had ever had in my pocket at once up to that day in my entire life, thanks to the boss having kept it safe for me. I looked around the city and made my way to Myers department store to see if anything caught my eye in the way of necessary clothing since not only did I have money but also time to spend it, a rare combination. I found myself gazing at a sumptuous display of every variety of kosher delicatessen item in the food section: Myer's kosher department. And who should be one of the attendants behind the counter but Elizabeth, my friend from the Napoli, with whom we used to exchange books and read aloud our favourite bits out of Villon to each other.

We were surprised and pleased to have renewed our acquaintance so fortuitously but she had to serve the customers. Her tea-break was due in a little while, however, and then we were able to talk. She took me up to the cafeteria where I had to tell her all about my life and adventures since the Napoli departed from Melbourne. She, in turn, told me that she was married and very happy. She asked me to dinner that night at her place. As it happened, her nephew and niece were also coming and she would finally be able to introduce us. She had told me about them on the ship and promised to introduce me when we should get in to Melbourne, as she expected them to meet her on her arrival. This didn't eventuate in the hurly-burly of disembarkation, but she hadn't forgotten.

Regretfully, I had to decline and miss out for the second time as I had to catch my train. It made me glad though, to have seen her happiness. It is always such a relief to find a familiar face in a strange place. In this case it was doubly so because I treasure my friends and like to know how they fare even if I don't see them from one year's end to another.

It didn't take me long to get a job with a furrier when I returned to Sydney as the season had just begun. By this time I was a fully qualified, confident cutter, experienced in every kind of fur that could come my way. The job was interesting and I earned well but I felt a resentful, jealous atmosphere there among my co-workers which robbed the job of all satisfaction. This, and the fact that I never seemed to have any money left after the weekend, convinced me that I had to seek my future elsewhere. It was almost uncanny the way I automatically spent more as soon as I earned more. I usually carried whatever money I had in my pocket and bought what I needed, or thought I needed, if it was value for money. On the urgings of wise advice I had accumulated twenty pounds in a savings account, against dire need, while still under subsidy from the Society, but in spite of strenuous efforts ever since, had been unable to increase that magical amount until my return from grape picking with my unprecedented wealth.

There had been no expenses there apart from the occasional 'shout'. No Prince's in Martin Place on Saturday afternoons. This was an elegant and excellent spot to continue the hunt for the ever desirable date, if unsuccessful at Redleaf Pool in the morning. A large dance band backed the *chanteuse,* who used to twine her sinuous arms around the microphone stand like the snakes in the doctor's caduceus. No Trocadero, no Pekise Club. Neither Hasty Tasty, the only eatery always open, to drop into in the wee hours of Sunday, to exchange boasts or to commiserate with failures; nor Clock Milkbar in Darlinghurst Road, where you got the best milkshake in the Southern Hemisphere, or indeed, the entire planet for all I knew; nor movies; I had already seen all the films shown in Redcliff before I left Sydney. There had been nothing to lure out of my pocket all the shillings left over after board and other basics were paid. We used to joke in our early Paris days that we would starve if we should ever get to America because we would never have the guts to change that precious possession, a real, genuine American dollar bill, for anything so mundane as bread. I remembered this when I was on my way to the bank with a hundred pounds out of my Mildura savings and a firm resolve not to touch it unless compelled by an earthquake or similar event. Nor did I, little suspecting in what form, or I should say gorgeous shape, the event would arrive.

Zoltán & Adi in 1953

5 FOUNDATIONS

As if someone with a mischievous sense of humour were orchestrating it from on high, for long periods nobody even thinks about you and then, the doorbell chimes and the telephone rings at the same time, just as you are poised over the toilet bowl. This is how the threads of my future came to a junction and took shape all at once in the early spring of nineteen fifty-three.

After eighteen months in my job I was suddenly and unexpectedly fired without explanation. Later I realized that a poor winter season had coincided with a bit of a slump in the general economy, to which a luxury trade like mine is very sensitive, and there must have been a dearth of orders.

Whether it was the shock or the result of my many hours of dreaming on the matter, it gave me the necessary impetus towards starting up on my own. Even though I still didn't have a family to fall back on for the lean times at the beginning, which every business goes through, and the knowledge of which had kept me from trying before, I went ahead.

I had on many occasions seen soft toys in the shop windows and thought that this was something I could do, something I could get into with a little capital.

Until I learned, later, that the only firm manufacturing them in Sydney at the time was constantly advertising for staff, I thought it providential that they were in need of a cutter just as I had decided to become one. The firm was well known and later made even more famous in the film of Lawler's The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll as the place where 'Roo, the hero, played by Ernest Borgnine, found a 'demeaning' summer job. I started work there right away, although for poorer wages than I had been earning lately. This seemed of little importance compared with the fact that I was learning something for the future. I made the adjustment from coats to koalas and kangaroos easily. They paid a basic wage for a predetermined minimum produced, plus an agreed bonus per piece for anything above that. As a tradesman, I was quickly able to cut faster and produce more out of a skin than the management was used to. After two months I asked for a raise. The boss thought I was paid too much already because of my bonuses, and offered to let me do the work at home and pay me by the piece. He assured me that I would benefit, he had experience with others. Since I had no car, the skins would be brought to me and the ready cut goods would be picked up. I had a large room in Darlinghurst Rd and since the work was neither noisy nor noxious, I didn't envisage any trouble, so I agreed. I needed no machinery, only my knife, which I had already. The arrangement worked extremely well. I earned more than I had ever done before, in less time.

One Wednesday night I was having a late dinner in Victoria Street when Timi walked in. I offered him my congratulations on his recent engagement and he invited me to his place for the following night to meet his fiancée. We chatted, catching up on all the news. I told him about my new work. We parted, but not before we reconfirmed the visit because he, "Might have a surprise", for me.

I had often found myself bored and alone in the world. I had had a great many affairs but somehow they never seemed to last. I hadn't been in love for a very long time – if indeed ever. I was too busy settling myself in my new venture.

When I walked into Timi's place next night Nina, his fiancée was already there. Timi proudly presented his future bride and went to make coffee while she told me all about their wedding plans. I was about to mention my promised surprise when there was a knock on the door and in came an elegant attractive girl of about twenty.

The first image of this shapely young blonde, with large, interested green eyes and shoulder length, wavy, blonde locks swept to one side, is forever etched in my memory. She immediately made a positive impression, reinforced when I found out that she was also Jewish, also in the fur trade, and also from Hungary, although, not from the provinces, like me, but from the capital.

I tried to contain my instant interest within bounds and spaced my questions with revelations about myself. I found out that she survived the Holocaust in the Budapest Ghetto with Raoul Wallenberg's help and her aunt's care, together with her brother Louis. Her mother had been deported, miraculously survived and returned to Budapest, unlike her father who had been shot on the march to Germany. She had arrived to Australia in January '48, ten months before me, at the age of fifteen. Upon arrival her little family settled in Melbourne with her Uncle Feri, where her mother became a substitute mother to her two orphaned young nephews.

Before we parted that first night she accepted my invitation to go dancing to Prince's for the following Saturday, but not my offer to see her home. One of my failings is a terrible memory for names. She was already borne away by the Bondi tram when I realised that I didn't know hers. It was too late to return and disturb Timi to ask, so I spent the intervening days in tortured as well as delicious anticipation until Saturday, when she told me during the first dance, simply and without reproach. Her name, (not Adi) is uncommon and she was quite used to people mispronouncing, mistaking and entirely forgetting it. I don't dislike it, as she immediately disliked Jack, one of my names then, and Zoltán too, for various reasons (and bestowed another name on me, by which she has called me ever since). By a special effort I memorised her name then and there but have never used it, preferring all sorts of endearments, except when referring to her in conversation with others, when it came strangely to my tongue. I added the need to solve this problem to my other reasons and decided that the sooner I could call her my wife the better. I loved her already and felt that I had found a glittering treasure. It was towards the end of the dance that I discovered that the aunt who looked after her and her brother in the Ghetto was my friend Elizabeth from the Napoli. Adi was the niece whom I had twice missed meeting in Melbourne, the first time nearly five years before.

Love comes to us in all its limitless forms and variations but uniform in this: that we think it the one, the real one, at the time. Love cannot be presented, nor purchased, no matter what the reward, nor begged, nor donated, nor extorted no matter what the threats. When it is there you just feel it, sometimes most unexpectedly. The many ideals of femininity I had fallen for ever since my early teens do not deserve to be disregarded, but I nevertheless, unequivocally state that Adi was my first, my true love because she was the only one to have evoked from me those certain, special, intense feelings and ideas. Ideas of certainty that this is it, ideas of permanence, of commitment, of Marriage. Although it didn't fall to her prescient and willing aunt, her dear Aunt Elizabeth, upon whom it had devolved to nurture her sister's children through the worst time of crisis, who tried so hard to bring it about, we were introduced. It was meant to be.

It seemed as if we had established an affinity from the first moment of meeting and discovered that we had the same easygoing outlook on life and held approximately the same order of values; although by nature we were totally different. As soon as we met we fell in love and could no longer be content without each other, though we found it difficult to be together because what she likes best is reading, classical music, opera and theatre; is not fond of socialising; was mostly bored in company – while

I like to mingle with people; light, easy-listening music; read often but prefer to watch sport. There are generally two, sometimes three, opinions possible on any subject, I usually hold the moderate, reasonable one and she cleaves firmly to both extremes, to which she feels entitled, being a Gemini.

The benefits from her extra years of schooling became apparent on our many long walks along the dark streets of night time Sydney, gloriously aromatic with the spring flowers and aglitter with the coloured lights reflected from pavements wet with spring rain. We recited poetry and sang songs for hours on end. The ones we both knew we sang in duet, in several languages. She introduced me to the joys of bushwalking where I learned to trust her judgement in general and her sense of direction and ability to read maps in particular.

In my turn, I introduced her to Redleaf Pool, that emerald in Sydney Harbour's bejewelled necklace and to my diamond studded ring of friends, some of whom were sure to be there, no matter what the season or time of day, because it is sheltered from the southerlies by a steep hillside; from the fiercer rays by a row of poplars and from sharks by a strong fence which serves also as a sundeck. It was a popular meeting place. The mild sunbeams of early August are trapped there so that extremities the tingly water chills are quickly warmed again in the fine, golden, heated sand.

My regular nightmare goblin-visitors found my preoccupation with Adi an obstacle to their usually easy access to me. Not that I discussed them with her. Other than telling her about the loss of so many of my large family I didn't elaborate. My frequent night time tussles with camp guards, races with slavering hounds and vain attempts to convince Mengele (the doctor in charge of sorting the arrivals to Auschwitz for work or death) to send my parents to work instead of to the gas chamber, remained locked inside me, but receded under her benign influence and positive presence.

Adi was an instant hit with my friends. When it came to the actual introduction, I opted for the easy, European one of allowing the parties to announce their own names while shaking hands. With Peter, an equally voracious reader, she found many novels to discuss and never a cross word although I expected it as she is also a bit of a know-all. Andrew the handsome, to whom looks were all important – he could never pass a mirror without admiring his own and patting his waves into place – pronounced favourable judgement on hers, and she delighted in listening to Paris-born Maurice, whom hardly anybody understood, for no matter what language he spoke it all sounded French. Even Salamon forgot his shyness enough to talk to her.

We were able to spend so much time on Redleaf Pool that summer because I had asked Adi to join me with my work. I was sure we would enjoy working together and also make more than either of us did separately and so it turned out. Every morning we would decide how much we wanted to produce that day and how long it would take us. Depending on the weather we planned our hours and played with allocating them for this or that purpose like a miser heaping his gold into this or that pile. We didn't have to clock in at any fixed time, though we disciplined ourselves more strictly than any overseer could have. My father would have rejoiced to see it. He always despaired of his children ever getting out of bed and making a living if left to themselves.

Adi's French dates from this period. I am always boasting about how quickly she learned because she was well taught, by me! We started cutting at eight in the morning, worked through till two. Then we went out to lunch and on to swim if the weather was fine as it mostly was, or to a museum if wet, or a park if cool, and worked another few hours after dinner, which we also always ate in a restaurant. Adi early informed me that although an adequate cook, she preferred to spend her energies otherwise (mostly reading).

We 'boys' had a standing invitation to Uncle John and Auntie Peggy Lewinnek's house every Saturday for afternoon tea. Childless, they became guardians to Avi, one of the orphan Holocaust survivor boys and frequent weekend hosts to many of us from the Home. They became, and remained until their deaths, close friends to us, lonely survivors, to whom they opened not only their house but also their hearts, and were real *in loco parentis* to Avi, their ward. It was tacitly understood that any serious girlfriends were included in the invitation. By the time I introduced Adi there Avi was engaged.

Some Saturdays Uncle John would pack us, boys, (under protest) into his late model Chevrolet and take us to *Chevra Midrash*, an afternoon study group at the Mac, where the Torah portion of the week was re-read, explained and discussed. This was a part of his and Auntie Peggy's overall three prong campaign to complete our Jewish education, to integrate us into the Jewish community and to increase our level of observance, an uphill struggle at every step for varied and weighty reasons. Some of the others' reluctance to go was due to a simple desire to socialise rather, during their few free hours. Auntie Peggy's library table resounded to many an intense poker game in its time. My reasons were more complex, although I didn't analyse them then. All I knew was that I wasn't interested. The best I could give the subject of our youthful studies in *cheder* was that it had no relevance to my life, to anybody's life, in our twentieth century. The worst was that I just didn't want to know. A disbelief had become embedded in my soul even though I doubted the soul's existence.

I, like the rest of us, had come from an observant and pious home and received a basic, traditional Jewish education, albeit of a low level. However, as a result of the Holocaust I turned away from religion in complete disillusionment and remained with a vacant pit of unbelief save for a defiant determination to remain a Jew.

Contrary to appearances, this is not a simple matter either, for hardly anything is, in Judaism. The wisest of our sages have debated the question of exactly who a Jew is, without a satisfactory resolution. None the less, I'm clear in my mind that I am one, observant or not.

It was after one of these study sessions, when the topic happened to be the sanctity of marriage, that Uncle John offered to have the wedding canopy brought to his house whenever Adi and I should wish to have the ceremony. "It would cost you nothing," he assured me. Knowing his generosity, I was sure that not only would it cost me nothing but that he was already mentally choosing our present. Nevertheless, nothing would have induced me to accept for I was estranged from 'the laws of Moses and Israel' according to which Jews marry, and not on talking terms with their Giver.

In spite of this, the seed already present in my mind germinated. "Darling," I said to Adi the next afternoon, "you must know how happy I am with you. I want to tell you that I have never known such joy. I hope that's how you feel with me also."

She stopped sorting the laundry and looked at me speculatively. "I've never thought about it, but now that I do, I can say yes, I am also happy with you."

She said it with her usual plain candour. Slowly a tiny smile appeared, then grew into a wide full one, until her whole face radiated her feelings.

"In that case, let's get married!" I said.

"Married?" She pondered this, obviously new, idea. "What would we live on?"

This was not the first indication I had of her practicality, but it was the first interest she had shown in monetary matters. Throughout the many weeks of our partnership she had left all finances entirely in my hands and never asked one question starting with 'how much?', in the quiet assurance that I kept a record and had her share safe, ready to give it to her on demand at all times.

"Why," I replied, "whatever we live on now. There need be no difference."

"But the manager told us already that the factory will close for three weeks at Christmas. How do you know that they will continue to give us work afterwards? Demand is liable to fall off quite sharply."

"In that case we will earn less until it picks up again, or look for other jobs, but I'm sure we'll remember how to manage on less if it will be necessary. That's no problem. What's important is that I love you. I want you. Please marry me and let me worry about the rest," I said, and took her in my arms.

"Suppose we find we don't like each other after a while?"

"Then we'll do the other thing," I assured her.

Overwhelmed by these promises of penury and divorce, she was unable to resist me any longer and she promptly agreed.

So far was so good, nor did we need to deal with the many complications which usually emerge at this stage. They were solved for us by Adi's insistence on a Melbourne wedding. What little family she had lived there, and I had none in Australia. So we didn't have to hurt the Lewinnek's feelings by a refusal, nor subvert our atheist (Adi too, in those days) principles by a religious ceremony. We took this desirable happenstance for granted until, by chance, we found out what obstacles we had escaped. Probably due to Church lobbying, a civil ceremony was then unavailable in New South Wales to a couple, both of whom were of the same religion and whom therefore their own religious body was only too happy to join together. Victoria was more liberal. Nowadays, and already for years, any one of a large number of licensed celebrants of either sex will do the same for any two people, be they either or both Satan Worshippers; recite any text asked of them; in any place designated by the couple, up to and including while skydiving.

We made arrangements at once for Adi to go home and for me to follow a fortnight later, when the factory closed for Christmas. We have been apart many times since, for I am an inveterate traveller and was to leave her behind when it was unavoidable, while she and the children were a package deal, but that was different. I have only ever willingly let her leave me that first time, when I didn't yet know how unendurable it would be.

She and Louis, her brother, picked me up at Spencer Street Station in his ancient Ford convertible and took me home to their modest house in Balwyn. Next day we went to the Registry Office, the only venue for civil marriages, and found out that we had to wait in order to publicise the event so any legitimate objector got a chance to object! The date was then fixed for the first available day, a Monday, when our little party duly turned up and did the deed. It cost a guinea; I paid the pound and Adi contributed the shilling.

" . . . it is a state not to be entered into lightly . . ." (from the marriage service.)

". . . it is a custom that the groom and bride fast on the day of their wedding because on that day they are forgiven their sins . . . " (from the *Shulchan Aruch*)

Up to the day of meeting Adi most of my time had been taken up with girls, that is, getting ready to meet them; meeting them; picking them up; taking them out; taking them home and as far as they were willing to go. I had freedom, an irresponsible life, which I lived from day to day, a meaningless existence.

Marriage was the turning point in my life.

From the first we gave each other total respect and trust. We agreed not to tarnish our idyll with jealousy, but if either one of us no longer cared it would be each other we would tell first. Before Women's Liberation was so widely publicised we had complete equality of rights – no mine or yours, only ours - including any success, failure or mistake; we promised to fix the fault and not the blame, which would be immaterial, a tiresome and unproductive activity in any case.

Our reception consisted of a sumptuous, four course lunch prepared by Adi's mother, to which the eleven of us sat down in their garden under the spreading branches of a large fig tree – the symbolism of fertility wasted, we finished up with only two children.

The earth moved under us that night, as it did under the rest of the passengers and crew of the Sydney Express, on which we travelled home. I was getting quite familiar with it.

Home. Another four letter word. I had had none since my parents' house in my village. I sojourned in a succession of rooms – and the barrack – during the preceding ten years. The Darlinghurst Road room we returned to was still only four walls enclosing a bed, a wardrobe and workbench, exactly as before, but yet different, because we now lived there together, married, committed, united. It was no longer just a room but was our home.

Six years after the war housing was still so tough that we relegated the question of a proper place to the too-hard basket. People were paying hundreds of pounds of key-money. This bought you the right to live in a flat where you became a tenant under the protected tenancy act and paid no more than half of the basic wage in rent. We went out and bought a car instead, a green Morris Minor convertible. Contrary to usage, it came to be considered a male, called Moishe.

He was the materialisation of the open coupé I had dreamed of driving along the seashore with the top down and a lovely blonde beside me. Moishe was small, secondhand, but he went, unless we got into a traffic jam. Then cold compresses had to be applied to his fevered petrol pump. We had to push him for miles on the way back from Palm Beach, our very first Sunday Drive where the road leads along the Pacific Ocean, choked with other dreamers like myself. It didn't matter much because he was so light that we used to bounce him out of tight parking spots in which it was common to be caught in those pre-parking meter days. In spite of such shortcomings I rather fancied myself riding around on my own wheels. Strictly speaking, wheel, the other three were the finance company's, which led to an important, though unpleasant lesson.

Within months we had a minor brush with a truck. Our insurance company informed us that we had to bear the total cost of repair because it didn't amount to the excess, nor could we expect a refund, even though we were not at fault, as the recovery of client's moneys wasn't their role. The obvious next step was to leave them and insure with N.R.M.A., the motorist's friend, but in this we were blocked by the finance company. They were affiliated with our insurers and had paid them the insurance on our behalf, in advance, for the full two years of the contract, added the premium to the purchase price and charged us interest on the total from day one. No part of the premium was refundable so we owed our soul to a company who cared only to collect from us. We didn't know about 'buyer beware!'

Hire Purchase, or, as it was known, On The Never Never, could become a nasty trap into which we also, like many young couples in urgent need of every buyable, nearly tumbled, like Alice down the rabbit hole, to shrink away before we were aware. Instead of the Cheshire Cat and it's smile, it is the good life aimed at, that fades and the debts remain.

Adi's fears of a decreasing demand for our work in the new year proved to have been justified. We had the choice of getting jobs according to the alternatives I had given Adi, but I had a hunch that that particular success-bound-wave, which you rue forever if you miss it, was offering its back for us to ride. With every fibre of my being I knew that the course we were about to take was the right one.

As a first step, we bought a fur machine, secondhand. A new one cost as much as Moishe had and there was a three months' wait for its arrival from overseas.

A man I knew in the City told me of a tiny workroom and parking space we could rent in George Street, opposite Anthony Hordern. I forked over the last of our funds and he divulged the address. We were in business.

Our first customer paid with a cheque, another first! We were on our way. Eager and excited like a racing sprinter, we, innocent ignoramuses, rushed off to the bank to cash it.

"I'm sorry," the teller said, "I can't help you."

"But it says right here, on the cheque: 'pay J. Schwarz or bearer', so please pay!" Adi ordered him.

"Yes, but it's crossed, you can see it there," the teller countered, his forbearance unhidden, "and also marked 'not negotiable'. That means the money may only be paid into an account bearing that name."

"Can we have such an account?" Adi asked. I was busy working out how to catch my customer and exchange the troublesome slip of paper for real money, and left her to negotiate.

"Certainly, madam. If you haven't already got one you can open an account. Please ask the young man over there."

In five minutes we filled out the forms and were the proud possessors of a brand new chequing account with all our resources reposing in it, the necessary accoutrements of deposit and cheque book in our hands. I opened it and carefully wrote 'cash' on that important first line then signed my name with flourish on the bottom. There was no-one waiting. I plonked it before that uppity teller – you could do that in the absence of bulletproof barriers; armed robbery was not yet so fashionable - with all the nonchalance I could muster.

"I'm sorry sir," came the reply once more, "there are no funds in this account. I cannot pay."

"But," I spluttered, "I deposited a cheque not five minutes ago. What kind of a bank is this?"

"May I ask sir," the insufferable, supercilious obstructionist enunciated," is that the only money in the account, the cheque you just now deposited?"

"Yes, it is. I've just opened it." As he knew very well!

"That's it then. I regret, sir, but you'll have to wait until the cheque is cleared before that money becomes available to be withdrawn."

"How long will that take?" asked my Adi. Fury had pushed me beyond asking.

"Up to three working days I'm afraid. Today is Friday, not before Wednesday, madam." And with that sir and madam had to be content, nothing could induce that bank to disgorge even a part of all the money we had in the world. I had threatened Adi with poverty but I hadn't meant it like this.

We trudged wordlessly homeward, as dejected as we had been elated before. How were we to get through the weekend? Petrol for Moishe, a bit of fruit, let alone lunches and dinners. Whereas borrowing a few pounds had never been a problem before, it went against the grain of the 'businessman' that I had become.

Dinner! We had continued our former lifestyle of eating in restaurants, most often in the Europa, in Victoria Street, where we used to buy a card entitling us to six meals, at a discount. I put my fingers into my breast pocket where I usually kept the card to check on how many we may have had left and found four unused squares as well as a bonanza. Thanks to my habit of slipping any ten shilling note I ever received in change into the same pocket – one came out with the card. A feverish search of my other pockets as soon as we got home yielded four more strikes. Who needed The Bank of New South Wales (now known as Westpac but in no way changed for the better)?

One Sunday morning Béla came to visit us. He was, and is, one of the finest of men, acknowledged as such not only by me, although I knew it first, but also by this country, as proved by the large proportion of the alphabet it awarded him over the years to put after his name. White tennis shirt and shorts showed off his bronzed skin and spare, tall frame to advantage. He held his racquet in one hand and smoothed his moustache with the other, a sure sign of embarrassment, possibly due to having caught us still in bed. His clear blue eyes regarded us from under his high, wide forehead and shock of rich, auburn, back-swept waves with indecision.

"It is beautiful outside," he announced. "Wouldn't you like a game of tennis?"

We had to decline on three counts: lack of equipment, ability and inclination.

"How is married life, by the way?" he asked next. We had the answer to that down pat, having been asked repeatedly, in the previous months, although in differing tones. There was the one that implied: better you than me mug, you won't catch me supporting someone else's daughter; and the suspicious one, accompanied by a glance at Adi's middle that said: I know why you got married in such a hurry, to mention but two. Béla's was neither of these, only a preamble to his diffident offer.

"There is this flat," he said. "In Elizabeth Bay Road."

Had he said 'a pot of gold at the foot of your bed' we couldn't have been more astounded.

"It's in a terrible state, I've never seen anything like it, but it can probably be fixed up. The rent is thirty shillings a week and you can have it if you want it."

We were paying five pounds, more than three times as much, for just our room, also nothing spectacular, share bathroom and kitchen. We could hardly wait to have a look and understood his manner of offering it as soon as we did. The windows were broken, rats, mice and cockroaches had left their droppings as well as their dead on torn and filthy carpet-underlay, the wallpaper hung in tatters revealing damp and there was piano wire strung across the balcony in a way to suggest apprehension of a frenzied entry. Nevertheless, there was a bedroom, a lounge, a kitchen, bathroom and balcony, all tiny but enough for two. A real treasure.

"Are you sure you don't want it Béla," I asked. "It can be fixed up very nicely, and need not cost too much."

"No, you better have it. I haven't even got a girlfriend and you two are already married. You should have a home."

Now, from the distance of almost fifty years I could ask with more knowledge, more understanding, the question I first asked in the camp: what did I do to deserve this? The answer must be important. We keep asking this universal question whether good or bad befall us. That proves us to be moral beings by nature, with inbuilt ethics, whether we evolved or were created. Even a two year old tot will cry out, 'not fair' if he feels himself unjustly treated. The perceived injustice is felt as more hurtful than the misapplied punishment. Any number of lottery winners will squander their fortune and finish up worse off than before because of a subconscious unease about just deserts. I would not set myself up to be smarter than Job and his friends even if I believed in 'all that' but I do admit to having been brought up short on many occasions, of which this was the third, and made to ponder the mystery of the maze we walk among our fellow humans, some of whom are incredibly bestial and some the opposite. I have never let the mystery interfere with my appetite for life, of course, but nor can I dismiss it as I wish to, and not only because Adi won't let me. It seems impossible of resolution but yet we debate it. It is the theme of all great literature including the Hungarian Madács' Tragedy Of Man.

That flat became not only our home but the second cornerstone of our future. Its neglected state didn't shock us as much as it could have. We understood that there was a limit to how much owners of blocks of flats were willing to lose, or be penalised for owning, in any one year. The rents on protected flats were not enough to cover rates, land taxes, both cold and centrally heated hot water, insurance and cleaning. Repairs were simply not carried out. Just when they could have cashed in on the shortage, landlords were prevented by law; although some owners did get a share of the key moneys when flats changed hands, most lost a great deal and kept on losing with no end in sight. The same set of circumstances resulted in the torching of block after block in New York, which became mere shells, memorials to an undeclared, endless, insoluble war.

Home units came into existence in Europe before the war and were an instant success. The idea landed in Australia about a year after we moved in, just in time to prevent many owners from jumping off their roofs in desperation, for this was a wonderful way for them to rid themselves of Sindbad's Old Man of the Sea from off their necks, which their properties had become. Our block in Elizabeth Bay Road was one of the first to be legally divided into Company Title Home Units, repaired from top to bottom according to the requirements. Water no longer trickled, but gushed, out of the pipes once again but not any more through the roof. The units were sold: to the incumbent tenants if they wished to buy or, if not, to others. We bought!

To one, who had to wait twenty-five years for it, it is a noted pleasure every time to walk, no queuing, into one's own, private bathroom. No coins in the slot nor matches at arm's length were needed to activate a primeval gas water heater at the risk of scorched eyebrows. The bath was ready in seconds with water at exactly the desired temperature, and, slowly, with hedonistic aforethought, we would sink into and stretch out in it. True, showers are quick, soothing and refreshing, and still have their place in my life even now, but I added the luxury of bathing at whim to my ambition list that first time I had one, in a bath of my very own.

It didn't happen often, however. Though our own boss, Adi and I got up early, worked to capacity through the day and didn't stop till that day's quota was done. Neither bath nor Redleaf, not even a peek at a newspaper on weekdays, I used to listen to the news on the radio while shaving and showering. While stuffing the toys – a monotonous and repetitive action which did not need concentration – I rehearsed in my mind what needed to be done and in what sequence, organizing the work and planning the expenditure, always with alternatives ready in case of foul-up.

Yet, I was often caught flat footed due to simple ignorance. We had registered our business because the Taxation Department refused to issue a much needed Sales Tax Number without it. However, when the Department of Labour and Industry inspector came we couldn't show him the required Factory Registration because nobody had told us we were supposed to have one. Only his amused, typically Aussie contempt of petty clerical officiousness (then), saved us from a hefty fine. It wasn't enough to know how to manufacture a desirable product, buy the raw materials cheaply, calculate expenses correctly, sell at a profit, pack, deliver on time, collect payment, pay bills promptly and keep both temper and good name in the process. Officialdom, an ever present silent partner, also had to be dealt with. Golda Meir, sent out as ambassador of the newly established State of Israel to the Soviet Union, when asked what experience she brought to the job, replied, "None, my father wasn't a diplomat. There have been no diplomats in the family for over two thousand years."

The front room of our house back in my village had been a grocery shop in which my parents sold basic necessities in a small way and Adi's father had been a taxi driver. Nowadays college courses teach business management; we had to learn as we went along.

The sages warn that the Almighty first tries you with a dearth then with a deluge. We had known recession and felt it a sacrilege to complain of a glut of orders. The lure of opportunity, that literally knocked on the door or rang the telephone bell in the shape of customers with money in their hands demanding goods, was impossible to resist. Because we had no staff we depended only on ourselves and were able to deliver products of reliably high quality, on the promised date. Adi was forever charting time and motion studies to make us more efficient and my head churned with calendar pages against maximum expected production and juggled sums between bills for raw materials and maturing invoices. Brains and body weary to exhaustion by the time we crossed the threshhold at night, neither of us could muster the energy for cooking and washing up afterwards. The steak, still raw from the night before, was again left in the fridge, day after day, until, ripened to doubtful, we fed it to the neighbourhood cats.

No more poetry, nor duets, just deadlines and numbers. "How many" and "how much" became the mainstay of our conversation, relieved by, "I thought you changed the sheets on

Sunday!" and "Please answer that inquiry from Qatar, you know what to say, before you write to your mother again, surely two letters a week are enough", from me, and "It's your turn to go down for the sandwiches, I bought them yesterday," or "Please come quickly and bring your shoe, there's a cockroach", (Elizabeth Bay had them first) from Adi.

I begrudged the hours spent in other than productive work: cleaning house, shopping, laundry: finding out how to fill in the various forms and then further hours filling them in. Stocktaking, income tax forms, sales tax forms, statistics, none of it contributed to the moneymaking process. So much money needed! Just insurances: car, fire, loss of profit, home, life!

Had there been marriage insurance I would have taken that out too. Under all the pressure ours was threatening to crash.

An early example of a Lina Product

6 INCOMPATIBILITY.

Viki and Hedi had been happily married for nine years by '57 when they arrived in Australia and into our lives. Viki had suffered through the last year of the war in a forced labour brigade on the eastern front. He was liberated by a Russian patrol, the members of which were flabbergasted to have the 'enemy' hug and kiss them with tears of joy and gratitude running down his emaciated face. Upon his return home he found neither parents nor other kin back from the Holocaust.

Hedi and her family had escaped to the Soviet Union from her home-town on the border in advance of the invading German Army. They were caught, tried for illegal border crossing, convicted and sentenced: she, due to her youth, to a lenient five years of hard labour, the rest of her family to varying other, more years. She finished up in Siberia where she underwent whatever hunger, cold, disease and a callous, corrupt system, in tandem with the harshest climate, could inflict, until she caught the eye of one of the commissars. By the time she told me her story she knew the basics of mine. She used a deprecating tone, as if her own sufferings had been less!

"Have you any idea," she asked me, "what it's like to wake up in the night with a bursting bladder, and ponder, once again, whether to let go and have it freeze solid around you by morning, then pray earnestly to die on the spot, rather than go outside?" As it happened I did, from a friend who had served in the U.S. army in Alaska, but I didn't interrupt her.

"I knew as clearly as if a fortune teller had whispered in my ear, that either I become this commissar's mistress and get a chance to survive, or I refuse and die a hungry, freezing, lice-infested, anonymous death like so many before me, and he would find another girl for himself. He was always kind to me, shared his home and food, didn't beat me, even when he was drunk, even after I became fat, and, came the time for my release he let me go, together with our little Arkady, whom he loved."

Nothing I read, years later, in A Day In The Life Of Ivan Denisovic and The Gulag Archipelago, was new to me. Solzhenitzin wrote Hedi's words. I had been still inclined to the left then and was secretly somewhat incredulous.

"Nobody can have any idea of what chaos and poverty prevailed in Russia after the war when I was allowed to go home," Hedi told me. "Entire districts were empty of people, wiped out by years of killing, counter-killing, deportation, hunger and disease. The trains were a lottery. We clambered onto whatever came, wagons, flatcars or engines, we hung onto the railings, or sat on the roofs until we got chased off. The locals came to the tracks wherever we passed. They begged off us, or tried to sell us what they had, in most places the single produce of the district – it might be salt, or skins or whatever. But we had no money to buy and nothing to barter or give. What I had in my bundle was all vital for survival. You may imagine that I would not have burdened myself with one superfluous gram. Arkady was not yet three and couldn't walk far. How we wished we had something! Profits could be made. In the next district they would have only their own local goods and neither salt nor skins, all of which they sorely needed.

"Sometimes we were abandoned on sidings for days, not a soul able to say whether that set of carriages would go anywhere, ever again. Some walked off if there was a station not too far. They hoped to find better connections. I had to wait, I knew my limits of how far I could carry my little boy."

It took her seven months to get home. She didn't volunteer the information so I had to ask.

"On his third birthday he developed a fever. There was no doctor, and even if there had been, there was no medicine.

Nothing. Just the train, going then for two days with hardly a stop at those G-dforsaken stations. I saw the lice crawl out to the outside of his clothes, away from him. So many lice! I had no idea he was so badly infested. They know. Like the rats with a sinking ship." Her warm, brown eyes went red and shiny but the tears didn't brim over onto her round, full cheeks. She sighed a deep sigh that was almost a groan. My incredulity must have shown through because she said, "You don't have to believe me, but why should I lie?" Since then I have read that lice abandon a dying body. They must be able to sense a change in the skin. "I couldn't hold him, I was afraid of the fever," she whispered, and then the tears flowed, "because of those lice. I let my son die without his mother's arms around him, alone. G-d will punish me and I, too, will die alone."

Adi believes in destiny as a probability, not etched in stone but written on slate, that may be changed by certain procedures, but running away is not one of them. She contends that Hedi's life (also) bears her out. Hedi had to endure a similar itinerary to that of the Auschwitz bound, where she would have been taken had she not run east. Similar, even to the detail of having to keep for days the dead body of her dearest, her son, in the train, without any possibility of burial. I comforted Hedi as best I could and pooh-poohed her, to me, mumbo-jumbo notions.

She arrived back from Siberia to find nothing left of her family or of her former home. She travelled on to Budapest and turned to the community for help.

"They sent me to the country, to a family, where there was food, to be a maid." Viki lived three doors down. They met, married, had a little boy, and moved up to Budapest when Communism shut their private-enterprise livelihood down. There they managed, like everybody else, in the best way they could, both of them working on jobs, until the uprising in '56.

History records that Hungary always did better than the rest of the Russian Satellites and after the uprising more so, even though this had been ruthlessly put down. Hedi and Viki remained hesitant about departing, reluctant to leave behind a home they had worked and skimped and contrived so hard to establish, until Hedi actually glimpsed the Russian tanks rolling in. She saw them bringing the Soviet method of housekeeping with them, which crystallized their decision. The three of them left that night with just what they could carry, to brave the uncertainties of an illegal border crossing and life as refugees, together with thousands of their compatriots. The western world felt guilty about the Hungarians, having incited them to rise against the Soviet giant with promises of backup on which they reneged, out of a reluctance to start world war three. The guilt was resolved by taking in the refugees.

The little family arrived in Australia within nine months of leaving Budapest. Within three days of arrival both had jobs, and before the end of the year they were able to rent a comfortable little flat. Viki, eager and strong, worked as a storeman and Hedi started as a kitchen hand at the 'Cross, and bought into a nearby establishment, which I shall call Ma's Place, when the owner came to her with a partnership proposition.

At first their working hours, his from early morning to early afternoon and hers from mid-morning till after midnight, suited them admirably because it allowed Viki to help out at Ma's Place after his own workday was finished, just when they were the busiest. Early independence paid off in their little boy, who got himself to school and home and thanks to that latest marvel, television, kept himself entertained. Things worked out so well that Hedi was able to take over the whole restaurant when her partner indicated that she was keen to retire. And so Hedi became Ma of Ma's Place.

Because Hedi served liquor under the counter it soon became a centre for whores, pimps, thieves, fences and dedicated drinkers, to whom six o'clock closing was a deprivation. All found there what they needed and all were customers for Ma's liquor and food: unavailable elsewhere. The liquor, because of the antiquated pub-closing hours then operating and the food, because nobody could cook like Ma. Of course, Ma got a percentage from every deal. It was only fair. Nobody wished to cheat Ma, who trusted everybody and was in turn trusted by all. No leaks, she was silent and could be relied upon to remain silent to the grave. The police was not a problem, Ma kept them sweet. She always had warning of any impending raid and sent the evidence for a walk in a shopping bag with whoever was available,.

We had a standing invitation to their home on Sundays, their one day off, but we usually didn't accept. We knew they spent it in much needed sleep. Rather, we made it a habit to pop in to Ma's Place, on our way to a movie or on the way home, or whenever we were nearby. This meant almost daily for me, because half the souvenir shops with whom I dealt were at the Cross.

Late-afternoon lulls would find Viki in front of the restaurant having a smoke, contemplating the passing traffic and gauging the size of the clientele to be expected for dinner. That's where we had many of our talks, that was the scene later of my harangues and pleadings, while Hedi put the finishing touches to her preparations for the rush to come.

I am not aware that Viki ever sought or followed advice, although that didn't ever stop me from giving him mine. Probably by instinct inherited from a long line of merchant ancestors, Viki, like Australia at that time, diversified business according to the best economic principles. An opportunity came to buy a terrace house nearby. At Viki's insistence, they scraped up the deposit and bought, even though Viki was obliged to undertake a second job to keep up the payments. A resultant boom, in mining and film, to mention but two in the national, and rent income in Viki and Hedi's private, finances, proved the theory correct once again. However, as they hadn't yet finished paying off Hedi's partner the pace had to be kept up for at least another year, according to Viki's calculation. All thought, he told me, of his giving up his second job had to be abandoned for a while longer.

Villon tells of their day long slapping matches and all night love making in his Ballad of Villon And His Fat Margot, one of my favourites, which Adi and I read and recited to each other with great enjoyment in the days when we still had time for poetry. Unnoticed, our sessions became rarer and ceased altogether on our hard ride to prosperity, although our 'slapping matches', unlike Villon's, were merely verbal, even before we learned to fight according to the rules laid down by Haim Ginott, the father of modern relationship nurturing and conflict resolution. But, words do hurt – to the quick, contrary to the sticks and stones rhyme. Words like, 'your fault', 'you are so stupid,' 'why did you have to go and do that?' 'I told you it would, I said so distinctly, but do you ever listen to me?', 'you always do that, just to infuriate me!' and the rest of the 'You' sentences which Ginott so incriminates as causers of conflict.

Instead of our bones, it was the invulnerable unity and unassailable harmony of the two of us together, or rather, this idea we had of us as one entity, that broke. The realization that not only were we not proof against the world, but were capable of turning on each other, like an auto-immune disease that attacks the body it is meant to protect, made me wonder whether there was life after civil war. When Adi's Uncle Feri had asked me in the car, on our way to our wedding, whether I was absolutely sure I wanted to marry her, I had flippantly answered, 'Yes, and if I find I am wrong, we'll divorce', I never had such an intention. Not even when things were the worst. I remembered the time before my marriage, when I had merely existed in comparison, and knew that that would never be an option.

So we slashed and burned our blundering way in our power struggles. The daily routine was got through, switched to automatic, always in haste, and questions like: were we happy, and, where was this leading, or, how long could we carry on like this, or, how can we re-align ourselves, never got asked. How could they when we were mostly not on talking terms? Haim Ginott was still a student and the words 'that turneth away wroth' to replace the poisonous ones, were not yet in our mouths.

Not until I was forced to drive home from work three times a day to tend to Adi, stricken by sciatica for two weeks, did the issues change aspect. Those trips brought me up short, refocused my direction.

Two weeks! Never mind the orders she was unable to complete piling up, I had to drop the urgent work in my own hands in order to go home and help her with the many personal things she suddenly couldn't do for herself. I had to support her few steps to the toilet and hold her on the seat, give her medicine, turn her in bed – the slightest movement caused her excruciating pain – feed her, provide her with tender loving care. It was enough to redefine my priorities.

Her turn came when I developed kidney stones soon after. The difference was that she was forced to witness my agonies completely unable to help me, but the result was the same. The relevant values were etched on the plate of our several memories, available for instant recall from then on.

We made a new pact to decide everything together, like the bees. Should a difference of opinion arise, we would wait until we could convince each other, and in the meantime forego making any decision. Among many, one result of this was, years later, our having to use the toilet in the down-stairs laundry for six weeks, while we debated the colour of the new loo.

By the time Viki and Hedi's lives so intertwined with ours we were firmly re-established, having come out the other side. Not the flighty, romantic, idyllic lovers we had been, or, not only, but married lovers: dependable, solid, committed to the good of our commonwealth, in certain knowledge of that being the good of each member; one hundred percent there for each other, warts (which we had come to know) and all. We turned out to be a still stormy, but effective and loving team for she makes up what I lack in exactitude and I supply the speed and business acumen.

'So I hope husbands and wives will continue to debate and combat over everything debatable and combatable,

Because I believe a little incompatibility is the spice of life, particularly if he has income and she is pattable.'

Ogden Nash

Except for our own recent rough interval, still fresh in my mind, I would have dismissed Viki's and Hedi's new tendency to frequent loss of temper and resultant sharp words, all starting with that accusing 'You', as minor and unimportant. As it was I read them for danger signs, which, in a way we had been expecting because of the strain from the grinding pace they were keeping.

Viki became moody, sometimes even mean. We put it down to sleep deprivation, which affects everybody differently. The subject of their fights was mostly money and the way Hedi was spending it generally and on suspect items brought in to Ma's Place particularly.

"I honestly can't see what harm I'm doing," she told me. "By the time it comes to me the stuff is stolen already. No way are they going to go and put it back where they found it! And I don't make a business out of it. It's not as though I resell it."

"The stuff is off the back of a truck!" Viki would shout, "I don't want us to have anything to do with such goods, nor deal with the customers!" In that I completely agreed with him, though not aloud. My penny's worth was not what they needed right then.

It is almost impossible to separate private life from a business in which so many hours are spent. Though Viki knew it was undesirable, they socialised with their customers. There was neither time nor opportunity to make other friends. Adi still believes that our frequent visits and attempts to reduce tension and calls for patience were beneficial, but I doubt it for I couldn't stop Viki from buying his second house when the next door property came on the market. I didn't analyse my feelings and was not experienced enough. All I knew was that he trod in the footsteps I had managed to leap away from just before the pit

When we left for overseas we felt that a crisis had been averted. Upon our return therefore it was only a minor surprise to hear that they were expecting.

All over the Eastern Block the favoured method of contraception was abortion. Hedi had confided to Adi that back in '54, after her last one, she understood that she would not be fertile any more, so the tremor the baby's first kick set up inside her had been like an earthquake. She had had no inkling until then for she had felt well. Had they known early, she was sure she would 'have been brought to see reason' once more. Abortions were illegal then in Australia, but there was no shortage of accommodating operators – for a fee commensurate with the risk they were taking.

Hedi gave birth to a sweet daughter, whom they named Hadassah after Hedi's mother. The birth serendipitously occurred at the start of the long school holidays. Almost from the first the baby was entrusted to her brother, eleven years old, who was carefully instructed in formula making and nappy changing, which he skilfully organised to coincide with the advertisements on television. A kindly, lonely old neighbour also made herself available so business could go on as usual, though Hedi did her best to increase her hours at home. In case of need, they were only a short taxi ride away.

Unfortunately for Ma's Place, drinking hours were finally extended to ten o'clock. This meant a serious reduction in income, which Viki sought to remedy by extending their business hours still more, to include Sundays. Increased tension, further reduction of sleep, less time with the children pushed both of them beyond endurance. Viki became violent and Hedi defiant. Our experience-driven pleadings went unheard and our warnings were ignored. Yet, I was desperate to stop him. I had visions of myself waving a flag reddened with my own blood in his face like the track-walker in a Russian story who had only a white kerchief by him to stop the train rushing on to a washout. I told him the story about the landless peasants and the cynical landowner, who, seeing the Communist shadow on his castle wall, decided to distribute his land ahead of confiscation, but thought to get some amusement out of it. He announced that on a designated day anybody could gain the amount of land the claimant could run around within a designated time. The runner had to be back at his starting point or forfeit. Greed had made the peasants overestimate their ability to run, as the landowner had known it would. Two dropped dead on arrival but most didn't complete the run and, after the exhausting effort for nothing, had to put the best face on failure and heartbreak. Viki dismissed it as irrelevant and kept running with his eyes focused on the riches of the future.

Adi and I discussed and pondered endlessly on how to help them, how to point them back to the happy family life they had enjoyed while still poor because we suffered along with them and suffered twice: once when we foresaw what would happen and again when it did. This was before it was so generally known that advising people is counter-productive, especially if it is unsought, no matter how good the advice. I was unable to replace the image in Viki's mind of himself as a tycoon, with one as a happy *pater familias.* We concluded that taking care of little Hadassah sometimes, to give the parents a chance to sleep, was the best help we could give them, although I had come to the conclusion that people should be allowed to work out their lives without interference. When you came right down to it, nobody could help anybody. Not really. (Whereupon Adi pointed to all the help we had had in our lives and the money we were giving, in our turn, to charity.) Adi and I were trying to start a family of our own, without success, and felt the irony of looking after a child for whom her parents found no time.

As they continued to ignore our advice, pleadings and warnings, we thought the explosion, when it came, to have been inevitable, though the final trigger was unforeseeable.

The professional girls, regular customers, often asked Hedi why she put up with Viki's violence. The answer stumbled hesitantly out of Hedi, for it hadn't occurred to her that there could be a life without Viki.

"It's simple. I love him and he loves me. He doesn't drink or gamble and he's faithful. He's never looked at another woman."

She had kept the idea of the innocent, loyal, caring virgin she married intact in her mind and attributed his overambitious greed to the trauma of the series of shocks he had had to endure in the illegal border crossing, loss of home, security and status for the third time in his short life, and confrontation by a new, alien language. She accepted her own easy leaps over the same obstacles as natural, the result of the 'advantages' of early experience she had had of them.

Ma's boast of Viki's loyalty egged a young prostitute to action. She seduced him and, insult to injury, publicised his intimate ways until there was no doubting her.

As much as she had loved him, Hedi now came to hate and despise him. The thought of his touch suddenly revolted her. He told me the tale later, as if in confession, to rid himself of it.

"I was stupid with sleep. I opened the door, expecting a message that Hedi wanted me to help cope with a sudden upsurge of business. That girl just got undressed and I couldn't resist her."

They separated.

Neither our pleas on his behalf nor his promises of total reform availed.

Hedi had gone on diets before and knew the difficulties – she was a realistic woman. She hoped to do better this time with the help offered her by the pharmacopoeia to which she wasn't a complete stranger. Quick acting 'uppers' and 'downers' had come to her aid ever since Viki first insisted on keeping open for longer hours, forced on them by the later closing of the pubs. The constant tension and conflict also helped, and she lost 10 kilos fairly quickly. She refused to work with Viki any more.

For the first time in her life she cared for herself and received compliments from Slobodan, a regular customer, for her looks rather than her cooking. The experienced smile and European charm with which it was paid was heady stuff for her. She took a flat with Slobodan and spent freely on decorations, clothes, pills, and on gifts for him. She fell in love again.

"All right," Viki tried to bargain, "I deceived you and now you've deceived me, we're even. We can start from scratch. If only for the sake of the children. We'll forget all this enmity and love each other more than ever." But not for this had Hedi endured the nausea and dizziness of reducing pills. As if he had shown any concern for the children in the previous two years! Yes, she would start again but not with Viki.

When the usual money flow from the restaurant shrank to a dribble, Viki decided to make one more appeal. It was hopeless for him to try and run it by himself. Surely, he could make her understand that that slimy, lecherous leech only wanted what he could get out of her and would leave her, wrung out and denuded, as soon as he got his hands on her jewels, all her precious beloved jewels – or what he could sell them for – and anything and everything else he could get out of her. Viki meant to be persuasive, patient and reasonable, explaining point by point how it would be unless she saw sense, and how it could be, better than it had ever been, if only she were willing.

Inevitably, she was not willing; and he was not able to contain his anger. He beat her up in his mad rage that turned to hatred. He cared little where his blows landed. He stopped only when Hedi's oaths of revenge and threats of, "I mean it this time, I'll have you killed for the vicious rat that you are," penetrated his loudly throbbing ears.

As a result of the beating Hedi and Slobodan gave up their flat, packed up and left Sydney. Hadassah stayed with Viki until he was able to arrange a place for her in a boarding school. Hedi told us she would come back for her as soon as she was settled but never did.

Seeing them inflict worse tortures on each other than they had ever suffered from their enemies is still one of the serious sorrows of my life, the more so as, after having plumbed all the possibilities we could think of to prevent them, we felt guilty at our failure. There had to have been something more we could have done! We asked ourselves how could the love these two had for each other turn to such enmity and answered out of our own experience: easily.

Viki salvaged what he could. The houses had to be sold because Hedi successfully claimed half of everything through her solicitor. Boarding school fees had to be paid.

Viki worked two jobs again so news took quite a long time to filter through to him about Slobodan's solitary return to the Cross. The police at last contacted Viki, 'acting on information received in connection with the finding of Hedi's body in a room of a boarding house,' six months after her departure. Viki refused the offer of having it brought back to Sydney, at his expense. The autopsy report he was officially handed, together with a battered suitcase containing a few pieces of filthy clothing, stated that a quantity of amphetamines, enough to extinguish the breath from her once again large body twice over, was found in her blood.

Thinkers have pondered over the mystery of the origin, existence and complexity of life ever since thinking began. And not only the mystery of the existence of life but the added mystery of its cessation. Scientists of every kind have spent lifetimes on finding the exact causes, in order to discover the true causers of death, whether these be microbes or men. Amazingly, sometimes, in spite of the vast amount of knowledge accumulated in forensic science, coupled with eye-witnesses and corroborating evidence, it is difficult to connect the body and its murdering hand. How much more so when such evidence is not provided!

Slobodan was taken in for questioning but later released for lack of conclusive evidence for or against suicide, accident or murder. We each have our opinion: only Viki is sure that it was murder. He is retired now, lonely, and still bitter. The children are married, with families of their own, unable to forgive the dead mother who abandoned them.

7 COMPENSATION

The momentous occasion of voting for the first time occurred at the same elections for both of us. Although Adi had been a citizen for years, having fulfilled the requirement of two years' residence before turning eighteen, she couldn't exercise her rights until she was twenty-one, the voting age in those days. I had to wait five years for His Honour, the Lord Mayor of Sydney, Patrick Darcy Hills, to pronounce me an Australian. He, born one, could have had no concept of the depth of its real meaning to me. Neither did I – then.

Already at our first meeting Adi and I realised that we both loved travelling and were determined to do so. Indeed, she had been on the first leg of her round Australia trip when I shunted her 'into my garden'. Citizenship provided the first of the three requirements for overseas travel, that of passport, which had me fooled too, into believing this to be its total value, until my first departure and return home.

Although I didn't become altogether converted to the Australian way and still read my newspaper from the front, I felt a strong bond of kinship with the lanky, sandy haired stranger seated at the next table to me on the Piazza San Marco in Venice when I saw him look first of all at the sports page, and heard the familiar cadence of his speech, that proved him my fellow countryman. Of course, I knew better than to mention this, for one who 'doth protest' his patriotism, unlike to an American, is highly suspect to a habitually undemonstrative Aussie. That feeling of belonging, and not just to any old place that happened to have given me refuge, but to a country I could love and be proud of, with whose policies I mostly agreed, and to which I could wholeheartedly devote my loyalty, was as large and important in my life as my bond had been to Hungary before it disowned me.

I had heard, "It's a free country," bandied about from the moment of my landing. When Prime Minister Menzies failed to have the Communist Party banned I became convinced of its truth. Macarthyism was rampant in America and percolated through to Australia, as everything eventually does. 'Commo', or 'Pinko' were as derogatory as 'Abo' and 'reffo' and once you were branded no soap could wash it off. In spite of alarums from across the Pacific about reds under beds, the Australians had chosen freedom and voted 'No' in the referendum that sought to ban the Communist Party.

Maurice, the Parisian, whom we nicknamed Shovel because of his tall, slight build and large feet, was the expert politician among us and kept us informed of local and overseas developments. We teased him that Leon Blum, the Socialist Prime Minister of France, lost his best adviser when Maurice emigrated. Since Adi's progress in the language we encouraged him to speak French directly. Even after years in this country, it was still easier to understand than his fluent but highly accented English.

"I wouldn't have anything whatsoever to do with Germans," he announced, "no matter what they offer."

It was a balmy autumn Saturday afternoon, when we again found ourselves in Redleaf Pool, back in the mid fifties, together with a few of our friends. Adi foretold that it was the last swimming day of the season. It had that scent and stillness about it.

Large expanses of bare sand were exposed instead of skin; the poplars were already thinning on top and an occasional caw from a passing crow mingled with the gulls' screeches to remind us that yet another summer was gone.

"You can't dismiss an entire nation out of hand," Theo countered. "I grant you that they behaved outrageously, the worst of any, ever, nobody could argue with that. But you can't excommunicate a nation of sixty million. That mistake has been made already and the last war was its result." Theo, usually busy with women, gambling and song, in that order, was uninterested in politics, except when France was directly concerned, as now, that the Franco-German Energy Agreement was about to be signed.

Maurice stuck to his guns, "Dealing with the Germans is like pacting with Satan. Look how everyone ran to their aid after the war and built up their economy until they're again becoming the strongest in Europe, while the so called victors are suffering shortages. The English still have to queue for a bit of meat; in Belgium and Holland people's tongues are hanging out; the Parisians are freezing but guess who is bathing in cream?"

"That's exactly why this agreement will be good," Peter said. "It will provide energy for all and a boost to both economies."

"I've been told that they are going to pay compensation," Salamon said.

"What compensation?" Andrew wanted to know. He had also lost his entire family.

"You have to prove that you've been in concentration camp," I said, "and what you suffered and whom you lost and Germany will pay, a lump sum or a pension or both, according to the circumstances."

I knew this from my mother in law. She had written asking for various documents and a couple of signatures from Adi in connection with her claim. According to the latest news it was already being processed. They were quick off the mark in Melbourne.

"Do you think I should apply?" Salamon asked.

"Tell him, Maurice!" Theo taunted. "Tell him to have nothing to do with them, and compensate him yourself for what he will miss out on."

"Ah, Salamon needs no compensation from me. Since he opened a workroom, under his beloved Menzies' capitalistic system he is making more money than the rest of us put together."

"It's true that I make more than I used to," Salamon admitted, "but I work hard too, sometimes fifteen hours a day. I'm now thinking of buying a car for deliveries, but I'm afraid to learn to drive."

He had whispered to me that the car was mainly to improve his chances with the girls, of whom he was still shy.

"It's nothing," I reassured him. "Once you can work one machine you can work them all."

"That's what I've been told, but you can't kill anybody with a sewing machine."

"Don't you believe it!" Maurice objected. "If not for the unions the bosses would still be killing workers, if not exactly with the sewing machine then with whatever was handy, as they used to do. And if you're not going to be careful, Salamon, you'll finish up killing yourself."

"Where can you apply?" Andrew asked. "I want to claim. I want them to pay, if only to stop them having it themselves, I don't care if I burn it."

"How much do you suppose you'll get?" Peter asked.

"What sort of a question is that?" Maurice put in hotly. "No matter how much he gets it's not enough. It cannot be enough. It cannot be paid for. Anybody who claims just cheapens the whole, unspeakable outrage. Sells their dear ones for money and tells the Germans that it's o.k. and in a few years' time when we have a new generation of Jews you can do it again, as long as you pay well!" He walked a small circle on the sand to calm himself then went on. "I tell you again we're not to have anything to do with them! I wouldn't touch them, except with the guillotine."

"Israel is accepting it," Peter said.

"How do you know?" I asked

"I read it in the paper."

"Israel is different. It's a country, and they need every penny they can get. If only to treat the sick and feed the destitute survivors who are sick and destitute exactly because of the Germans. It's only right. I hope they make them pay through the nose!" Maurice said.

"Well, I'm going to find out," Andrew decided. "Where do I go, Salamon?"

"The Welfare Society."

A silence fell. Neither Maurice nor Andrew needed to explain or excuse their emotions. We all felt it to a greater or lesser degree. The only thing at all remarkable was that it should have been the even tempered, generous hearted Andrew who had expressed it.

"I'm sure Israel is acting properly," Adi said. "It is written in the Torah that compensation has to be paid and certainly, the rabbis have so advised the Israeli government. Emotions and revenge don't come into it."

"We've got a savant in our midst," Theo said, wondering at this new aspect my wife was revealing.

"Not quite," she told them, "although I have the benefit of a Jewish high school education. Maurice, if we don't claim compensation it will be so much easier for the whole thing to be erased and forgotten. And don't think that there aren't those who are already busy pretending it never happened, or if it did, it wasn't that bad. And Andrew, don't talk about burning the money. There are plenty of charities that will kiss your hands for a donation if you don't want it."

"Lets not emulate the Gypsy," Peter said, smiling, trying to lighten the mood. The story of the Gypsy and his son was a well known one. On their way to market, the boy told his father how he was going to eat his fill of bacon for the first time in his life from the piglet they were about to buy, raise, fatten and kill.

Because the unaccustomed, greasy food would upset his son's stomach and make him sick the Gypsy didn't wait but set to there and then and beat up the boy forthwith. We all laughed and went in for a last swim.

I also decided to claim. I consciously made an effort and tried my utmost not to allow hate to poison my life, which I feared it threatening to do. Although I felt my hatred would have been justified, different from the Germans', who hated us for nothing, I believed hatred to be evil in itself. In spite of this I could not but resent the sight of the ubiquitous Volkswagen running about. My throat filled with acid when I heard German spoken and periodic news of Eichmann and his ilk, still free and enjoying life, made me physically sick.

As it happened I didn't get far with my claim. One of the first required documents was a birth certificate, nothing else would do, not even my treasured, new Naturalization Certificate. I wrote to my village straight away and received a politely worded, formal answer on official paper bearing the State Shield of The Hungarian People's Republic (without St Stephen's crown and bent cross). It contained the most astonishing news, namely, that according to their records I had been declared dead in nineteen forty-nine, and was consequently still dead. 'Therefore, as a deceased person has no need or use for a birth certificate, we do not consider it our proper role to send one.'

The mystery was solved in fifty-seven when my brother and his family arrived in Australia after the Hungarian uprising.

"Have you any idea," I asked him, "how I came to be declared dead?"

"Well, I sort of, you know, kind of, had it done," he confessed. "You've got to understand," he went on, "there I was with wife and child and no way to make a living because the State had imposed exorbitant taxes on all privately owned businesses and the State owned co-operative had taken all my customers. Our only chance was to move to Budapest so I had to sell the house. To write to you and await your permission and authorization would have taken too long. I had the buyer with ready cash in hand. What else could I do?"

"What did you have to do to get it?" I asked him.

"It cost me a bottle of sunflower oil in the right quarters. There was a terrible shortage at the time," he told me laughing. I remembered from my visit in forty-eight how it had been back there and understood.

By the time I again returned to my village in '89 the Communists were out of power. I met the clerk who'd written the letter and the entire Civic Centre staff. The place had been developed, electricity and water led into every house and the street paved. All the old houses, including the formerly Jewish ones, had been demolished and new ones built. Ours too. There were no Jews living in the area any more and apart from the cemetery, no sign that any ever had. Even the Synagogue was gone

The people, though, were still the same, immersed in their pettifogging narrow-minded, bigoted lives. I whispered another word of thanks to Fatman, who had encouraged me to turn my back on my village and seek the open world after liberation.

Those compensation claims were just like rape court cases. Like rape victims, Holocaust victims justified to themselves the re-living the past, which they were forced to undergo, by the thought that it was neither for revenge nor for money. It missed the target to be 'sweet revenge' and no amount of money was worth it. The hope was to prevent the same thing from happening again, an eventuality that excites the survivors' anxiety to the last breath. My mother in law came to visit us in the middle of her claim process in a futile exercise to get away from it all and was on the point of giving it up many times, as were the other thousands of claimants, enduring the same agony.

Salamon told me about his when I next met him at the height of his case.

"I'm continually having to leave my work and go from one doctor to another," he said, in answer to my, "How are you?" He was distressed and tense, as bad as he had been in Paris after he first found out about the loss of his family.

"They discovered that I've got some complaint that was caused in the camp and I have to tell what happened over and over again, every time to someone new."

Just when the little business he had built up was buoying his self-confidence he was subjected to a process which systematically robbed him of it. He was wasting away before my eyes, more nervous, thinner, more bitter, more desperate every time I saw him.

"They had no right to do this to us," he told me, when I met him again a few days later, on the steps of the Mac. I knew he meant not only what was done in the camps: the loss of freedom, of dignity, of faith, of health, of loved ones, of life, but also the forced re-experiencing over and over again. When I heard him I felt the hatred I had fought rise up again. Would the hell-fiends' power to hurt us never weaken?

"Why don't you leave it if it's upsetting you so?" I asked. "It's not worth it, you're making enough for yourself. You always made enough and to spare, which you always did when any of us needed it."

"I want them to know what they have done. You keep hearing about how they say they didn't know about it. They were just ordinary people and had nothing to do with it. If they have to pay they will ask why. Even their children. There are some people who say the whole thing didn't happen. I want them to admit that it did and pay for it."

I had no answer to give him to that.

Adi's mother received the support she needed against the reawakened bitterness from her loving family. This comfort Salamon had been deprived of by the very crime for which his claim now reactivated all the pain of the initial atrocity. The evil first given form at Wannsee in 1942 still wove its malignant power ten years after the liberation, in the furthest antipodes to where its victims fled. The day after receipt of the letter informing him that his claim had been approved Salamon committed suicide.

When the Soviet Union fell apart and Germany was reunited, compensation and war crimes trials again became hot issues. Against a background of re-awakened, virulent, world-wide neo-Nazism Germany decided to make further compensation payments, subject to a means test, to long term victims who had missed out before and who were in need. The cases were being handled in a much more considerate way than before. In the meantime several countries, including Australia, brought in special legislation to enable war crimes trials to proceed against resident suspects, helped by additional evidence that had become freely available from the former Soviet Union.

Both subjects came up, inevitably, as a few of us sat around our dinner table when the long delayed court case, the first in this country, against Polyukhovich, finally began in Adelaide. Polyukhovich's name had first gained mention in the media a year or two before, accompanied by much public argument about the legality and the high cost of such a trial. There has been much wrangling about the legislation necessary to enable the trial to take place for many questioned the wisdom of pursuing it so many years after the events.

Among us there was a division of opinion too, because of the suddenly much increased level of anti-Semitic attacks, even to bombings and arson, concurrently occurring. The Perth and Adelaide Jewish Communities were the first to suffer. Few disputed the connection to the legislation. Eva, Charles' wife, advocated keeping a low profile. She said, "The more you publicise it the more people will get ideas and join in. Pretty soon it'll spread more than it otherwise would have."

"So, on that basis," Peter retorted, "we just let them get away with it: the war criminals with murder and their local supporters with arson or whatever else the sons of Belial may wish to put their hands to. Is that what you want, Eva?"

She didn't reply.

Salamon's, 'I want them to know what they have done', had stuck in my mind. I made it my business ever since to keep up with what the new generations of Germans thought, and were taught, about the war. I wanted to know whether they knew.

I found out that both Nazism and Neo-Nazism are flourishing in spite of the government's efforts to the contrary. Known ex-SS. members and ex-Nazi Party members, not to mention sympathisers, are public servants, teachers, school principals, high ranking police and army officers, even mayors, to this day. Some of the first consequences of unemployment in Germany were 'actions' – we used to call them pogroms – against Turkish communities, in several areas, carried out by gangs of youths. Houses were torched and many men women and children were killed over an extended period, until the 'actions' were suppressed. At the same time Germany is the only country where Holocaust denial is a punishable crime.

I found out that the youth was informed about all aspects of the war. War films were well attended and were re-run on T.V. many times; generals' memoirs were well read. The young generation was interested. I asked myself what their reactions may have been – in classrooms, or in the darkness of cinemas or in the privacy of printed pages – to the overwhelming variety of horrors committed by so many of their parents. I wondered how I would've felt on finding out that my family's financial advantages were the benefits of slave labour, or extortion, or looting, or counterfeiting or blood money from Switzerland, as many young Germans must have found out. How did they react to discovering that three generations, including the baby and the grandmother, of the previous owners of the antique silver candelabrum on the dining room dresser, had been bayoneted by their father? The father using the same hand with which he patted their head in paternal satisfaction? Or that the father of their classmate had been responsible for their father's lack of equipment on the Russian front where he starved and froze to death because the supply wagons were used to send Jews to the maws of gas chambers?

I have spoken to the young Germans and learned what I could. Many are outraged that old hatreds are being revived and old wounds are reopened by, " . . . dragging so called Nazi war criminals, immigrants from formerly German occupied territories to America, Canada and Australia, harmless old men, through what is termed due process of law. The Nuremberg trials punished the guilty and the rest set about paying compensation from amidst the ruins and are paying them still. They are just going to rehash and dish up for the world's dinner, every monstrosity on Germany's plate all over again. All wars are hell. Germany was not alone responsible."

That's what the accused had said at the Nuremberg trials. Nobody was responsible. Not the unjust judges, nor the doctors who experimented on living patients, nor the soldiers. They just followed orders. They weren't responsible, they weren't guilty.

The plight of natives in these newly self-righteous countries is pointed out and our rights of jurisdiction over former Europeans is brought into question especially after such a time lapse. Only when reminded that there is no statute of limitations on murder, that the guilty should not get off scot free just by evading capture, do they run out of argument. Nevertheless, almost all agree that an apology is in order.

Germany has apologized. The Pope has also made several carefully worded statements, the first that not all the Jews are responsible for the death of Christ and the last that the Vatican was not free of blame for the Holocaust. He admitted that the Vatican failed to intervene on the Jews' behalf, was financially involved with the Nazis and helped to spirit away the guilty after the war in order to safeguard the fortune involved. We know that the enormity of Jewish suffering over the millennia is directly attributable to the churches' teaching. I keep my ears open for further statements from the Vatican.

Some apologies have been made to the Aborigines, here in Australia, but the one from the Prime Minister and government is yet to come!

In the event nobody was convicted in Australia and even in Israel, Demjanjuk's appeal was upheld because of doubt of identity. Opinion is still divided and both sides claim victory. The ones who hadn't wanted the trials point to its lack of results and those who did satisfy themselves that the charges had been laid and the facts stated in open court. At least those men didn't get off entirely free.

At the same time our children are also asking difficult questions, such as : "How could you allow yourselves to be driven to your deaths like so many sheep?" And, "Where was G-d?"

We, survivors, know how it was. How inconceivable, foreign and impossible resistance was, except in the few isolated cases, where their future fate was known to the victims. Whoever had the opportunity joined one of the Partisan groups fighting the Germans, but were often killed just the same, not by the enemy, but by their equally anti-Semitic comrades. There was resistance in many places, the Warsaw Ghetto the best known, as heroic as at Massada, because death was known to be a certainty.

We simply didn't, were unable to, believe that the fate awaiting us could possibly exist on this planet.

Also, we remembered what a price was paid for that single Paris assassination in the Kristallnacht. But how can this be explained to young, trained Israelis used to facing the enemy with arms in their hands? The best advice from our police for when we're confronted by an armed robber is to give whatever is demanded in the hope of saving lives. Some rabbis try to exonerate G-d by blaming the victim. We still sometimes hear what causes the bitterest afterpain to our trauma, that our dear ones suffered for sins such as not having kept the Sabbath properly and intermarriage and Reform Judaism: G-d had given them into the hands of our enemies as He used to do in biblical times. This is even taught in some of our religious schools by teachers who were not alive at the time and have little knowledge or understanding of the circumstances and conditions prevailing.

Our coterie responded with a rededication of effort against the increased anti-Semitism. Charles told us of an encounter when a German complained to him of the millions of Turks in Germany, unemployed due to the recession but unwilling to go home. "I told him," Charles said, "you couldn't abide the thousands of Jews, so now you've got the millions of Turks instead."

"That doesn't help us now against the resurgence of Nazism, our nightmares of fifty years are coming true," Andrew said, "in spite of everything we do to prevent it." He belonged to *B'nei Brith*, a campaigner in anti-defamation, and joined in their many information and inter-faith programs with enthusiasm.

"It's the young people," Margarete, Peter's wife, commented. "The youth are joining them! All they need is a new Hitler."

"When I told you what's going on in France," Maurice reminded us, "that they're desecrating cemeteries, and burning synagogues and bombing Jewish owned businesses, you pooh-

poohed it and called me paranoid. All you had to do was follow what happened in Lyon when that Monster was brought back for trial. He still had supporters there, collaborators, who were afraid to have the facts brought out into the open. Powerful enough to have them suppressed. Still today!"

"You don't have to go to France," I said. "Right here in our country, synagogues and kindergartens and Jewish shops have been burnt. Neo-Nazi graffiti appear on communal Jewish property. No arrests have resulted. Nazis immigrated here together with us. Australia has also become an anti-Semitic country."

"Become nothing!" Adi informed us. "There is a history of it here as long as white settlement, imported from England with the convicts. Calwell had had to fight the ten percent limit placed on Jews in any one ship bringing us in."

"Yeah, like they won't let you join the golf club!" Peter said, "but no pogroms, or murders."

"No, Margarete countered. "Those were reserved for the Aborigines – until now."

"There's no need to panic. It's the work of a few hooligans," Andrew's wife, Annie said. She was a local girl from the country, tall slim and athletic. She was accepted as knowing most about Australian feelings and attitudes, but I thought I caught a hint of a desire to play down, or even drop, the subject. Andrew had been involved in helping to organise the Survivors' Reunion in Sydney and later in setting up the Jewish Museum, and although he didn't admit it, Annie knew what a devastating effect it had on him. With much maneuvering she enticed him away: to help her look after the grandchildren instead and happily reported that he could now sleep again, if only they let him.

I had also been asked to help with the Museum but, regretfully, refused. I know myself. Plainly put, I cannot bear it. The more honour to those who do it anyway. I endured many interviews as part of the publicity for The Army Cap Boy. Sometimes it was more than I could take, yet, I felt compelled to go on. Later, I pushed myself to take part in an oral recording of my experiences when such a program was established for survivors, and again, recently, in a video recording as part of the Spielberg Visual History Foundation.

The question I was always asked at the interviews was: 'Why now, forty years later?' And now, fifty years later, there are still books coming out, films made, and commemorations held. I then answered that it had taken me thirty years to be able to start dealing with it and ten more to write it down. Some others are taking longer, but, as the victims of any kind of violence tell us daily, the pain never stops. The body encapsulates it, but, like any latent infection, it erupts at the least additional burden placed on the system, as if having lain in wait for the opportunity. This burden is amply provided by the increasingly successful, international campaign of the neo-Nazis.

Australia was still in its age of innocence, unsophisticated in anti-Semitism, when we landed here, the place furthest from the scene of our trauma. The worst we then encountered was exclusion from some clubs or Salamon's Macdonald's kind of abuse. Now, Australia has progressed so far that a Special Force had to be established to protect our proudly multicultural society from subversion, rather lame and ineffectual. The anti-vilification law, long in labour, was disabled, not to say still-born.

After the departure of our guests that night we turned on the news to hear of yet another synagogue burning in Sydney, the seventh. No casualties! There seemed to be an agreement that as long as no life was harmed, no prosecution would follow. In spite of *B'nei Brit*, of Interfaith Programs, of Survivors Organisations and of the Special Force, besides the Arson Squad, up to this day and after yet one more synagogue fire, not one court case has resulted. Society seems as powerless against the neo-Evil today as we were before. Hate is spewed out unchecked: in mosques, on Party and League platforms and over the latest, most modern tool, the Internet, as it has ever been overseas, all over this country of our refuge, of our adoption. The people of Kosovo were driven from their homes and land in spite of the best international efforts. However, at least the NATO forces acted to stop the 'ethnic cleansing'. For as yet undiscovered reasons no Allied bombs were ever dropped on the gas chambers!

Zoltán & Family 1965

8 MIRACLES ?

The city of Jerusalem featured large in our travel plans as a result of Auntie Peggy's reluctant recommendation. Reluctant because she agreed with Uncle John and all the rest of our friends that we, young and at the very beginning of our business enterprise, without parents or family, were crazy to think of gallivanting overseas spending money instead of earning it.

Our friends didn't know that, on the contrary, during the many long hours of grinding work, thoughts of travel were what kept us sane – and together.

The song, "You gotta have a dream, or how you gonna have a dream come true?" from the musical, South Pacific, took the words right out of my mouth. While Adi was sewing the machine noise discouraged conversation but enhanced imagination. I transferred the sound to the ship's engine room and I saw us aboard a liner slicing the waves as the Napoli had done. We travelled 'to lush, exotic, palm filled vales' and 'cultural heights in European capitals', as the brochures had it.

Finishing the toys was done by hand. Except for the occasional expletive when Adi's needle slipped on a tough bit of kangaroo skin and pierced hers, it was done noiselessly. That was when the images became translated into words and we were able to detail our desires to each other.

We planned to leave in early ‘57, after the Melbourne Olympic Games, which promised to boost our business along with the rest of Australia. But we were compelled to wait another year. This was due to two momentous events much further afield and as far apart from each other as Cairo and Budapest. Meanwhile we had the chance to save more money.

Although repeatedly denied by each one separately, Britain, France and Israel cooperated to invade Egypt in 1956. Britain and France wanted to repossess the Suez Canal, newly nationalized by President Nasser of Egypt, and Israel wanted to secure the safety of its citizens.

In the meantime the U.S.S.R. acted to quell the Hungarian uprising. Almost unbearable poignancy was added to the usual excitement in the Melbourne Olympiad when the Soviet marathon runner, Kuts, captured everybody's heart as well as the gold medal with his charm and prowess. Hungary was pitted against the Soviets in the water polo final, while Red Army tanks rolled over the bodies of freedom-fighters in Budapest! We learned to separate the individual 'enemy' from the actions of his government and countrymen.

The Arab nations never accepted Israel's existence. They fought against it by every means at their disposal, whether fair or foul. After the cease-fire mostly foul, with all the enthusiasm of unmitigated hatred. One of these foul means in the fifties was frequent incursions into Israel from Egypt by *Fedayeen:* desperate, hopeless refugees from the target area, who were therefore familiar with it. They murdered whomever they found, robbed and pillaged what they could and set fire to what they couldn't. Israel joined in the Suez Operation to put an end to their depredations.

As a result of the short campaign the *Fedayeen* were effectively discouraged but the Suez Canal remained Egyptian. Furthermore, not wishing to share Israel's fate, to whose shipping Egypt had always refused passage through the Suez, the aggrieved parties had to help clear the ships Nasser, in his pique, sank in the Canal during the first days of hostilities, to block it. Otherwise all ships would be forced to sail round the Cape of Good Hope forever more. Our own Prime Minister, Menzies, thought to rise to the occasion and offered his services to mediate in the case of Nasser versus Israel *et al.*, even travelling to the scene to show good faith, but, no discredit to him, was unable to achieve what took another forty years to resolve.

During the uprising in Hungary the Iron Curtain keeping the reluctant Communists inside lifted enough to let thousands of Hungarians slip under and escape to the West, my brother, his wife and son among them.

Australia, very generously, offered to absorb ten thousand of the refugees and the U.S. provided the troopship, the General Taylor, to help transport them here. We had to stay put until they arrived.

We awaited our reunion with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. Adi's regular, frequent exchanges with her family in Melbourne had influenced me to make closer contact with my brother than I had had before my marriage, but I still wrote guardedly about Australia and my life here, out of consideration for his powerlessness to emigrate. Affected by the many stories freely circulating, of strife between the newcomers and their, longed for, local family members who brought them out, I tried, before their arrival, to anticipate and avoid possible sources of trouble.

Unfortunately, I failed to recall the state of mind of new immigrants: their immoderate anxieties about whether they had made the right decision to leave behind all that is familiar, albeit bad, whether they would get a job and 'make it' in this strange place, whether they would be able to support their family without having a trade in their hands or the language on their tongues.

By '57, although still plentiful, you could no longer waltz into a job as you could in '48. It took six hours of driving around to eight different places before suitable work turned up for my brother. By the third hour all the hardships he had left behind seemed not so terrible; by the fifth I was Moses who had brought him to the Sinai Desert to die; and had he not got the job when he did, in his desperation, he would have started off then and there to walk as far as Perth and swim the rest of the way back.

It was a further tremendous relief all round when they found a fully equipped flat they liked in Bondi, for which the Welfare Society lent them the key-money, because it meant an immediate refocusing of their interest away from memories of the full larder they had left behind.

"Have you any idea Zoli, what a stick of salami meant?" he used to ask me. "And we had six hanging up!" He was deflected by the magic of hot and cold running water in both kitchen and bathroom, by the comfort of lavish breakfasts and dinners around their own table once more and by the star-filled exercise books my young nephew was bringing home from school almost from the first day. With my sister in law also happy in a job she had found for herself, and the Suez Canal cleared of obstructions, we could go gallivanting off into the world at last, not only unworried about my family, but with a fuller purse.

This also came about because of what happened overseas, this time in America. Our business, unlike the rag-trade of most of our friends, wasn't limited to a season. Fur toys and souvenirs were always in demand and our koalas and kangaroos never went out of fashion. We could make stock ahead if we were not deluged with orders, in certain knowledge that we would sell the surplus sooner or later, if not locally then overseas.

I was forced to upgrade my geography and Adi her typing as we answered queries from, and established contacts with, businesses in every continent. We even exported toys to that limitless source of them – Japan. From the beginning we kept flexible hours as pressure of orders demanded and many a Saturday night or Sunday found us in our tiny workroom finishing and packing up an overseas or interstate order so as to meet a delivery deadline. We thought we were working to full capacity, and never minded because the rewards were there, until the Davey Crockett craze hit us. We then found out what real 'full capacity' is. It has been suggested that we should date our calendar from that event!

A film was made of the life and times of this American frontier hero and every child had to have a hat like his, a fur toque with a bushy tail hanging from it. Immediately.

Adi's Uncle Feri, who had been a skin merchant at one stage, had begged us to rid him of the leftover Australian red fox skins he had cluttering his garage when we visited Melbourne a few months previously. Thinking of our Moishe's tiny boot I declined. Adi used to suffer from car sickness, no way could we transport the smelly skins all the way to Sydney inside the car. Six months later I telephoned, imploring him to put them on the first plane! Pressure to produce was such that our wholesaler picked up the goods twice a day and the skin merchant delivered to the door to save us time. In three days we used up Uncle Feri's stuff, just for the tails. Our life was only work and the minimum of sleep six days a week. We snatched breakfast on the way in and dinner on the way home. Every other activity was a waste of time that was costing us money, including answering the, "What's with you, you're never at home?" inquiries on the telephone. from puzzled friends. By the time our chance, 'taken at the flood', abated, as we knew all the time that it soon would, we really needed to go on our holiday, but had to wait still longer, for the third travel requirement, a ticket.

Not only were we doing well, everyone else seemed to be also. The thousands of incoming migrants had not taken their jobs from the locals, as had been feared. Rather, they soon established themselves and started new businesses like we had done, where they employed, unlike us, many workers in new industries. Goods which had had to be imported before were now manufactured here and were even exported. Berths were booked out on the ships for months in advance.

For a sum that would have paid off our flat we became the owners of tickets entitling us to a cabin (above the waterline): on the Fairsea sailing to England by way of Panama; on the Fairstar coming home via Suez; on the Theodore Herzl going to, and on the Jerusalem coming away from, Israel – altogether thirteen weeks aboard ship, still the best mode of travel.

Traditionally, for generations, whoever could afford to, used to go on 'the grand tour' to complete their education. We thought of our trip as a holiday and delayed honeymoon but it became much more than that and the learning part began even before we left. Because of our tight budget, in spite of the extra money we made, we were the forerunners of today's backpackers. We found out all we could, in advance, about the places we intended to visit and guided ourselves everywhere, a pioneering procedure in those days when tourist spots swarmed with guides, both official and unofficial, who rattled off their patter for a fee to mostly ignorant rubbernecks. Experience on that trip formulated my favourite travel adage, which I share freely with all, that the myriad discomforts and mishaps must be taken in stride for they are bound to happen and will spoil what can still turn out to be a wonderful time – if you let it. Adi has been hinting that the same is applicable to life at home too.

The first mishap occurred before we left. Adi's mother, up from Melbourne to see us off, upset her stomach and Adi was loath to leave her, sick, so far from her own home. Another bus usually comes along, but another ship, probably fully booked anyway, months in advance, wasn't due for six weeks. Mother-in-law had to be entrusted to a dear friend to be looked after and put on board her train as soon as she was fit to travel and Adi had to call forth all the self-discipline she could muster to make herself go up the gangplank. Instead of the expected joy and exhilaration of the long awaited trip, she was filled with worry until we received word that Mum was safely back in Melbourne, recovered and feeling fine.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said of Adi. She assured me that the seasickness that made her lie immobile in the cabin from the moment we came abreast of Watson's Bay would pass in three days, after which no storm would affect her. I made increasingly lamer and more dubious explanations of her absence to the steward and my table companions who continued to cast suspicious glances, that hinted of bodies overboard and life insurance claims headlines, in my direction, after the second day of exceptionally smooth Pacific seas. True to her promise, she did recover on the third day, but not completely. Every now and then, even on land, where seasickness isn't supposed to occur, she felt fleetingly unwell.

Not until eight months later, in London, where she could at last be thoroughly examined, did we discover the cause. It was a usually harmless kind of cyst that had chosen just that time to start growing in her ovaries. Had a Spanish Gypsy woman in Granada, whom we could in no way prevent reading her palm, not assured us that we would have, "One child for sure, possibly, likely, very likely two," we could have despaired much more than we did after the operation Adi had to have. The surgeon had told us she had done her best in this regard but could make no promises. King Saul's experience with the witch of *Ein-Dor*, discourages fortune telling, yet, Adi has a strong case proving another bit from our lore, that G-d sends the medicine before the disease.

It was a conscious decision to use these difficulties to savour every moment of our trip all the more, and nowhere as much as in Israel. Even to me, an inveterate skeptic, to whom Gypsy women are charlatans; the World To Come is pre-Big Bang void; and miracles are solely in the mind of the beholder, even to me the place is special. Every clod of it is imbued with an intrinsic significance. Aborigines feel something similar to their tribal lands which Jews find easy to understand.

Our visit coincided with the tenth anniversary celebrations of modern statehood. Watching then the grand parade of the armed forces, and of the arms (so pitifully few of both ten years before!), the fly-past of the latest fighter planes, it was not so hard to believe that it had been their strength and their desperate determination alone that had won the State. Every discussion of the Holocaust, and it seems to surface, inevitably in any gathering of Jews, apropos of nothing, throws up the fact of the existence of Israel. I am in turn infuriated, aggrieved and astonished at the various claims connecting our sins and the Holocaust, but the connection between the Holocaust and Israel is clear.

The atmosphere prevailing in late '47 contributed to the very close voting by the United Nations that legalised the modern State of Israel. It survives and remains strong in spite of its years of subsequent unrelenting embattlement.

We celebrated the Passover *Seder* with my cousin in his modest home. We read in the *Hagadah*, about the miracles of the Exodus and the 'strong Arm and mighty Hand that had brought us out of Egypt'. I dismiss glib talk of Messianic Times and modern miracles. But now I take a little longer to discount the importance attached by believers to certain events because of the Dutchman whom I still think of as Pompom.

We had many, deeply emotion charged experiences in Israel: reunions with long-lost, dear relatives and childhood friends and meetings with their children. Every encounter and each step on the holy soil, sanctified by our ancestors of long ago, was burdened with almost unbearable passion. These children were not just children but living representations of victory over evil: of survival, once again! Once again we were not annihilated. We were not eliminated! Here was the next generation living in their own reborn country, in spite of every effort by millions, to the contrary!

On top of all these overcharged feelings, what effected me most profoundly was a completely different and unexpected meeting. A meeting which was a reunion as well.

In the wagons taking us to the camp in '44 we had suffered terrible thirst and could not stop drinking at the first chance we had, upon arrival at Bergen-Belsen, but were not yet hungry enough to swallow the slop we were given as soup. Our bread rations were still adequate. Nevertheless, like my companions, I took my share from the cauldron, as soon as I managed to get hold of a container, at the vigorous urgings of the captives in the next compound, who had been there much longer and felt it. With gestures as well as, to me incomprehensible, words, they asked us for the food we didn't want. I gave mine to Pompom.

He stood apart from the others who were crowding the dividing fence, reaching their hands over for whatever they could get. He was taller than most but just as emaciated, thirtyish, fair skinned and gray eyed. The pom-pom on the dirty cap he wore made him easy to pick out. Possibly because his silent, unclamorous embarrassment at the need to ask appealed to me the loudest I gave him my portion then and for the subsequent two days that it took for me to become hungry enough to put the disgusting stuff into my mouth. I used to see him afterwards too, from afar, always alone, until I left the camp with the fifteen hundred taken to the train, aboard which we were eventually liberated. (According to latest revelations from MI5 archives we were part of a trade, arranged by Himmler, of 3500 Jews for five million Swiss francs and safe haven for two hundred top Nazis. The money was to be donated by Jewish organizations. The Swiss did the brokering. One lot from Teresienstadt went through but when Hitler got to hear about it he immediately ordered that no more Jews were to escape. All were to be killed.)

I thought I saw him again thirteen years later on the bus to

Haifa where the Z.I.M. liner, Jerusalem, waited, to return us to Europe. I was sure it was he when he stood beside me momentarily in the throng on the quay. He had filled out a little, his cheeks were not quite so hollow and his sparse blond hair was visible without the cap but I knew him then for sure. I hesitated, pondering in what language to speak to him. By the time I decided on English, and just as I opened my mouth he was swept beyond speaking distance. Although I kept an eye open, I didn't see him again until the afternoon of the second day out. Adi was still seasick and so were many other passengers – the Mediterranean is no respecter of seasons and kicks up rough at any time. Pompom was sitting by himself on a bench in a sheltered angle of the top deck, looking a bit peaky.

My, "Do you mind?" came out easily and naturally and I sat down next to him at his nod. I decided to continue in English.

"You don't remember me, but I remember you. You were in Bergen-Belsen in the compound, next to mine."

He looked searchingly at me without much change to his expressionless, bony face, but shook his head at last.

"I have changed a bit," I said smiling, "I was much younger and wore an army cap." He shook his head again, slowly and wonderingly. I began to fear that he didn't understand me, though I would have expected him to indicate this if so.

"Do you remember when we arrived? Hungarians? We gave you our soup at first. I gave mine to you."

His eyes lit up then and his face filled with animation. His whole bearing changed.

"You survived! I have so often wondered," he said in well accented English. He looked at me, with more perception this time, but again failed to find the shaven headed, scrawny, dirty, smooth-faced boy I had been, under my dark curly hair, mustache, thick, black-rimmed glasses and added kilos. He shook his head in amazement.

"I am so glad," he said, "so glad. I wanted to find out about you. I so much wanted to know. That's why I came to Israel. I should not have given way like that. I should have known."

He said the last bits more to himself than to me, but its emphasis and conviction aroused my curiosity. I could relate easily to his wanting to find out about the subsequent fate of his camp companions. We never missed the Red Cross radio sessions after the liberation, in hopes of hearing the name of somebody we recognized read out as being among the living, although we knew hardly anybody by their proper name, only by nicknames, such as Gander-neck or Fatman. But to come all the way to Israel for just that after all that time, without even knowing my name? And what special importance could I have for him? True, I also used to search him out, till I left the camp, but I had put the cause down to sheer boredom. I now remembered the jolt of satisfaction I felt every time my seeking gaze had landed on that pom-pom, still bobbing. It was a sort of battle standard, still flying, a reassurance, which I immediately and superstitiously repudiated. I couldn't afford the emotional loss should I no longer see it.

"Didn't you manage to find out about your relatives?" I asked. Upon our arrival in Israel we had been directed to the Jewish Agency and were there given the addresses of everybody we asked for within minutes.

"I don't have relatives in Israel. I wanted to know about some of the people in the camp, one in particular, but I didn't have enough information, mostly just the first names. No dates of birth nor dates of arrival in Israel, if they, indeed, finished up there. The Jewish Agency cannot trace people without those details and doesn't know about people in other countries. I hoped there would be an international register. And I couldn't even begin to ask about you. I don't think we ever exchanged a word and I never knew your name."

I told him my name then and also, in a few words, in answer to his eager questions, about myself and my life, and got a strange boost from his smiling nods. In my turn I asked him, "How did you expect to find anybody without knowing their names even? You must believe in miracles."

"As a matter of fact I do," he said quite simply, "and as you see, I am totally justified."

He spoke quietly, but his words carried impact, in spite of the ease with which that 'M' word still came to everyone's lips in that, the tenth year of Israel's existence.

"I don't understand," I said.

"As I told you. Most of all I wanted to find Yehoshua, but I didn't really expect to; and next about you, after whom I couldn't even ask, but here you are. You found me! There was no way that I could find you, so you found me! What would you call that?"

"Well, you'll never convince me that there's anything miraculous about me," I told him, laughing. A slow smile brightened his face, from which the green had quite disappeared. "You know, the definition of miracle is: an extraordinary or natural event happening just when it is most needed."

What do you call it, I wondered, when it doesn't happen?

I asked, "Why did you want to find me? Giving you that slop was nothing, I couldn't have eaten it. As soon as I could I stopped giving it to you."

"It meant a lot to me just the same, much, much more than food, particularly because you didn't just hand it casually to the nearest person to you, like everybody else, but picked me out every time. I saw you looking around for me."

"So you came to Israel to find me?"

"I had many reasons. I came first of all because of Yehoshua, who was really the Lord Jesus. I hoped for a confirmation or sign of some kind – and got it – as you see, at the last minute, though not in the way I expected."

I had been aware for a while of a young man, or rather of his shadow, solidified by the re-emerged sun, passing by on his circuits of the deck. I knew him to be a member of the Mormon tour group travelling with us. I had noticed him at dinner the first night because of his outstanding, Johnny Weissmuller, good looks. Also, American fellow passengers, who were well acquainted with the Mormon missionary zeal, especially towards Jews, warned us about them. He stopped, turned and addressed us.

"You'll pardon me I'm sure for butting in," he said in a pronounced American accent, but did I hear you mention the Lord Jesus?"

I knew a fellow in Sydney, a wartime convert to Catholicism, who remained a devout and confirmed Catholic even after the threat to his life for being Jewish, the reason for his initial conversion, no longer existed. I never felt it right to condemn him, neither for converting, nor for retaining his new religion. I am a fervent subscriber to freedom of thought, not to mention the glass house I live in regarding this, having also attempted the conversion road of escape in '44. But missionarising, by no matter who, even by my more religious fellow Jews, and most of all by a convert, arouses an amused anger. I am amused at the fervency of new converts and angry at the clear implication the missionarising carries of my inferiority. I hasten to add that I don't think myself unteachably superior either and therefore accept leaflets and read articles and appreciate, though disregard, religious persuasion of every kind. So my reaction to the Mormon, and to Pompom's immediate and warm, "Yes, you did. He comes into most aspects of life," was instantly hostile.

Up to that minute I had naturally taken Pompom to be a Jew. Then, from his words, I revised my estimation and believed him to be one of those converts and the Mormon's intention to make me another. Only manners prevented me from jumping up and leaving them to the deeply religious conversation they fell into, obviously a result of their recent visit to what was to them also the Holy Land, although the actual paths taken by Jesus were then under Jordanian rule and impossible of access from Israel. It soon became clear, however, that Pompom was not a convert. Neither his family nor he had ever been Jewish, as I had assumed, just because he had been in camp.

"How did you come to be in Belsen?" I asked at the first break in their flow of talk.

He didn't answer at once and his face became sombre when he did. "I was caught together with a Jewish couple I had hidden on my farm. We were taken to Auschwitz first. Later, when the Russians were approaching, I was transferred to Belsen."

"And the couple?" the boy asked.

"That very day the woman was sent to the gas chamber. Mr Bernstein was sent to work, at a different place from me, but I used to see him sometimes, until the last time, when he was also sent to death, and Yehoshua went with him."

"But, but, I thought you said Yehoshua was Jesus?" I asked, flabbergasted.

"I better tell you how it was."

"Yes, you better," the young Mormon agreed. He pulled over a deckchair and sat down opposite.

"That morning I went to work as usual," Pompom began, "but found a new man next to me. This happened often enough, and wasn't quite unexpected. Talking was forbidden, a severe beating was the least punishment if caught. We had to wait until we were marched back to the barracks. That's when he told me that he was Jesus but to call him Yehoshua. He was quite ordinary looking, in a darkish way, dirty and tired like the rest of us, except for his voice and eyes. There was strength in them.

We saw the group on their way to the gas chamber as we came into camp and there was Mr Bernstein, in the last row.

"I must have started or something, because Yehoshua said, 'He is the one.' And I said, 'Yes,' not thinking anything of it at the time. Next I saw Yehoshua alongside Mr Bernstein and for a wild moment I believed, I hoped, for a miracle. But instead of saving Mr Bernstein, Yehoshua walked to certain death together with him. I thought and thought about it. If He was just another Jew gone crazy how did He know about Mr Bernstein and me and if He was the Lord Jesus why didn't he save us all, or at least Mr Bernstein, since He went to walk beside him? I couldn't understand it and gave it up at last.

"Next morning, there He was again, working next to me. 'Don't be afraid!' He said at once, and 'We'll talk later.' It was very hard to keep quiet but it made good sense. Not for the world would I have caused Him to be beaten, besides fearing for myself. The days seemed terribly long. Although I was used to hard farm work – we were bagging potatoes – without a break and insufficient food inside us, it was torture. The minutes dragged by in pain. This day was longer than ever.

"Yehoshua fell into step beside me on the way back to the barracks. 'I want you to do something afterwards, when this is all over,' He told me. 'I want you to talk about it and tell how it was, and that I was here, with my people, taking my share in their suffering together with them, because I am a part of them and they are persecuted in my name. Will you do that?'"

He stopped here and looked at us in turn. Neither of us said anything. I didn't know about the young man but for myself, I dared not open my mouth for fear of what sort of croak would come out. It was no effort for me to visualise the scene; however, I didn't know what the Mormon made of it.

"I was puzzled by that question," Pompom went on. "I don't presume to compare myself to a prophet, or anybody like that, but still, whenever G-d wanted something done he didn't ask for consent. And as for telling about what we suffered, I didn't have to be asked. It was the burning ambition of us all to survive and tell the world what we went through, innocently. Didn't you feel that ?"

He addressed the question to me, needlessly. I couldn't help nodding my wordless agreement already while he spoke, although only the bravest and best of us, survivors, like Eli Wiesel, actually got on with the job. For me, it was to take 30 more years.

"Yehoshua went off with the group to the gas chamber twice more," Pompom resumed. He continued to work beside me all day after the third time and spoke to me all the way back to camp as usual but when, upon entering, I looked for the group on their way to the gas chamber, expecting to see Him again among them, there wasn't one, nor was He any longer beside me when I turned back."

"And did you never see Him again?" the young Mormon asked.

"Yes I did. In the wagon when I was being taken to Belsen. He was so close that I felt the warmth from His body, to be strengthened, to be kept alive by it.

"Did He speak to you?" the Mormon asked as Pompom stopped. "What did He say?"

"His presence spoke the loudest. It said that He was with us, as he had told me before, in all the places of our torment. But He talked also about His teaching, but not exactly as it is in the Bible. He said the law as given by G-d is the eternal law and the way of salvation is to follow it and obey it with love for G-d and for one another as He Himself had followed it all His life. And the salvation that will then come will be the Kingdom of G-d on Earth. For that to happen we must conquer greed and replace it with generosity; and change jealousy into faith; and most of all root out hatred and put, first compassion, then love in its place."

Pompom's words came slowly, which surprised me. He must have repeated them often in fulfilment of his task.

"Even while He spoke I felt that He was addressing me personally as well as in the wider sense and I remembered Willem, my neighbour. He and I had grown up together and sat side by side learning our catechism. But when the Germans overran our country we faced a moral crisis. He listened to the priest, who told us the new authority placed over us by the conquering army must be obeyed and accordingly, told the Germans about the Bernsteins hiding on my farm. He came to watch us being taken away with such a self satisfied expression that it betrayed him. I asked him what crime they were guilty of, to be dragged away like that and his answer came as a venom filled gob of spit, which then made me hate him. Until Yehoshua's words on the train it never occurred to me that hating as I did was against the teaching we had learned just as much as Willem's had been. In fact I never connected the two. Wasn't mine justified?

"I grew up believing that as long as I confessed my sins, received absolution and died with faith in the saving grace of Jesus I was all right, but I found out that that was the least of it."

Had Pompom levitated all over the ship in a blaze of glory from the sun just setting behind him, I couldn't have been more impressed, for here was the crux of the matter. The Christians hated us and had persecuted us for two thousand years because we killed their G-d and because we refused to accept Jesus as The Saviour, the Son of G-d, the second of the Trinity. And we refused to accept Him exactly because a saviour, by His nature was compelled to adhere to The Law. The law that said there is only one G-d and nobody else is to be worshipped as G-d. A saviour who set himself up as G-d was a contradiction in terms. And if He wasn't G-d we are not G-d killers. All this flashed through me while Pompom went on to tell about the train.

"He told me that He went around to all the camps and was with us in all the places of horror wherever we were to be found and took his share of it over and over again because whatever was done to any one of us was done also to Him, and not only here, but in every place where people clash with hatred. I asked Him why He doesn't just perform a miracle and do away with it all, and why does He need to go around the camps in turn, isn't He, can't He be everywhere at once? I also wanted to ask why He had picked on me but didn't dare. Somehow it didn't seem right to ask it. I forced the questions that I did ask against a sort of understanding that there was no need. Nor was there. He told me I would come to see, that I would comprehend everything in due course, even that He hadn't picked on me. It had nothing to do with what I had tried to do for the Bernsteins, as I half believed. I was simply one of many who saw and heard Him."

We heard Pompoms' last words through the pingings of the first call to dinner. The Mormon made a move as if to obey its summons. I had seen momentary expressions of distaste pass over his face during Pompom's recital and it seemed he was going to use the bell as an occasion to leave, but changed his mind and asked, "Why hasn't anybody heard of all this? Why haven't you done as you were asked?"

I noticed, as Pompom didn't, his skilful avoidance of naming Jesus.

"I tried, I really did. But I couldn't. At first I was too sick. The English liberated us and they were not very good at giving us the help we needed. They didn't have the resources. And then, when I started to talk about it I was put into a mental home. I made the mistake of going to the priest. He was new in the parish, having replaced the collaborator who had been transferred. He was young and inexperienced and didn't know anything about what we had suffered. He called me crazy and the doctor agreed with him. I have been in and out of mental hospitals ever since. I've only been out now since Christmas."

The Mormon got up. "I agree with them," he said. "If it had really been The Lord Jesus He would have looked after you, made sure you were all right and helped you to do what He told you to. I don't believe the whole thing. You made it up or imagined it. Hallucinated perhaps. I'm going to dinner. Good bye."

Pompom wasn't upset. He must have been used to such responses or worse.

"You're not hungry?" he asked me.

"I'm in the second sitting," I told him. "How about you?"

"Although I feel like eating for the first time since starting, I think I better not."

That reminded me of Adi, languishing in the cabin, but I was reluctant to interrupt the conversation. Even though you would have thought we had all the time in the world to take it up again on another day, I feared, as these things happen, that the mood wouldn't be there. So I asked, "What do you think of what he said? I don't claim to be a scholar but it seems to me G-d wouldn't ask the impossible and would, at least, smooth your path like He did for the prophets."

"That's not how it is. Not that I claim to be any more of a scholar than you, but I know that any number of prophets were in fact killed, some by Queen Jezebel, for instance, and quite a few of the better known ones suffered all sorts of persecutions and privations, including having to live in caves to save their lives and one even had to go so far as to marry a harlot on G-d's order. So being an instrument of G-d doesn't ensure an easy life, quite the contrary. But it's beside the point anyway. I cannot compare myself to the prophets. The boy thinks I'm crazy, and I don't blame him. Until you spoke to me I thought so myself, many times. He thinks I'm crazy because I don't repeat what he has always heard. Especially when the new doctrine is harder than the old, it is almost impossible to accept." He fell silent and sighed.

"It's obvious that you accept it. Do you now believe that it was Jesus?"

"Yes," he said with that simplicity of expression I had learned to expect from him. "There's no problem about that, He has appeared to countless people in countless different situations. The problem is, as you saw, with convincing other people. They don't believe me. They dismiss the whole thing by claiming that I'm mad."

It was getting dark and quite chilly. I made a move and Pompom also drew his jacket about him. "We better go inside," he said. We parted and I went to see if I could persuade Adi to join me for dinner, which she declined. I searched Pompom out the next day and introduced Adi to him. I could see they were pleased with each other but to Adi he was no more than a passing shipboard acquaintance and I didn't enlighten her until much later because I couldn't make up my mind about him and about what he had told me.

As it happened my fears were justified. The right 'atmosphere' didn't again eventuate, possibly because Pompom sensed my skepticism. He was a solitary figure without social graces of chit-chat. I sought him out, nevertheless, though he didn't seem to mind sitting alone, usually there on the top deck where I'd first found him. The Subject wasn't mentioned any more between us until we bade our good-byes, when I asked Pompom what he planned to do.

"I have no wife or family to worry about. My brothers have claimed the farm because they worked it all the long time I wasn't there, so I will try to go to America," he told me." There, I have a better chance, I think, to carry out my task and pass the message I have been given."

I wished him luck but feared for his success. I happen to know that the United States is extremely fussy about who is allowed onto its coveted shores, and ex mental patients, even if certified sane, are not among them. They probably think they have enough of those home grown.

I never heard any more about him, but then, I would be more likely to hear if he had committed a gigantic crime. Adi whispers to me that the angels work quietly, under cover. It is the Other Side, the *Sitra Achra*, as Jesus would have termed it in Aramaic, that goes in for publicity. There may be something in it at that, because, whether through his efforts or some other agency's, the message of hatred towards Jews that used to pour from the Churches has moderated, even abated, especially of late. The Pope actually declared officially that not all the Jews are responsible for the crucifixion – I wonder which of us is and which isn't – and then went to worship together with leaders of other religions in Rome, including the chief rabbi, at a special prayer meeting, for the first time in history. Later, also for the first time in history, he expanded on the theme. He stated that not only the Jews were responsible for the killing. Also, he apologised for the millennia of systematic persecution and, inconceivable only a little while ago, he instructed Catholics to repent for the crimes committed for so long by the Church against Jews. It is rare now to hear, as I did last Easter on 2CH, a Sydney, Church-funded radio station, a quote from the New Testament about the 'Jews who killed Christ'. (In the Old Testament we are always referred to as the Children of Israel!)

Perhaps instinctively I had turned away from hatred, young as I was, in recognition of its tainting evil. To make it easy, I try to avoid contact with Germans or Germany, but visited my cousin who lives there, when he was ill. The first words I heard, carelessly flung into the air by a tipsy passer by as I got out of the station were: "*Ferfluchte Jude!*" rotten Jew.

Just as Pompom learned his catechism, I learned the Law, the commentaries and explanations (the little I did), among them that we lost the first Temple (and Commonwealth is included in the term) because of idolatry and the second Temple because of hatred for nothing. The hatred referred to was between Jew and Jew, of opposing factions, one of whom went to the traitorous extent of bringing the common, powerful enemy on side, to the eventual disaster to all.

The same hatred resulted in the crucifixion of the most famous Jew. The devout Teacher who emphasized love as the important one out of the six hundred and thirteen commandments. The Jew in whose name and in whose cause an infinitude of atrocities were committed through the centuries in every place where His people were to be found, in a perpetuation of the same hatred, in direct contradiction to His teaching. An ocean of hatred against which Pompom's love was one of those precious drops that went to fill Elijah's legendary cup. This cup, when full (of our tears in exile), was to portend the fulfilment of the dream longed for over centuries, the re-establishment of the State of Israel and the coming/return of the Messiah.

Nearly two thousand years later we were on board an Israeli ship, together with an unrecognised hero, having visited a reborn, re-established, Israel. An Israel for whose future I, the unbeliever, feared, because of the same kind of hatred. Not only the murderous hatred of the hundred million surrounding Arabs, but that of one Jew for another.

When Pompom had mentioned his feelings of enmity toward his neighbour, who had betrayed him and his protegés, my reaction of empathy had been immediate. When he went on to explain that Jesus' demand for love of neighbour particularly referred to such a neighbour, since there is no need to instruct anybody to love a lovable neighbour, my response was the age-old rejection. It was the alien, the Christian, the enemy's doctrine, which I had never seen practised. On the contrary. A teaching of hatred toward Jews had emanated from the Churches all the years of Christianity.

It took a while for me to deal with all that Pompom's story meant to me, but I immediately recognized that it was important in my life. In so far as I have been able to counter hatred within myself I attribute it to this real Christian (considered mad) whom I had the privilege to know.

There are many Dutch names among the Righteous Among the Nations commemorated at *Yad Vashem*, the Jerusalem Holocaust Memorial. In imagination I include Pompom's name there and honour him with the rest in my heart.

9 LUCKY IN LOVE.

The four weeks coming home on board the Fairstar served as post-operation recuperation time for Adi. And me too. I always maintained I needed it more because when I bent to kiss her upon her return from theatre, I got a whiff of ether, fainted, hit my head on the next bed and suffered concussion.

We were ready to pick up our mundane, working life where we had left off on departure, immediately upon arrival. Except that our life never was mundane. We had to buy a car as Moishe had been sold before we left. We had given up our tiny workroom in George Street. Workshops were becoming available without key-money, so another had to be found and the equipment retrieved from storage and installed. We sold our little unit in Elizabeth Bay and bought a bigger one. Talk about upwardly mobile, from two floors below we rose to three floors above street level, overlooking Cooper Park, where we used to enjoy the A.B.C. Open Air Concerts held there, sitting on our balcony.

Later, when Adi had to carry two children under three, as well as the shopping, up those stairs, old fashioned eighteen instead of fifteen steps per floor, it didn't seem so desirable an address any more, but she never complained. We had had to wait such a dreary, long, forty-six months for the first and another twenty-nine for the second, that once we had them we considered it a privilege to lug our babies upstairs. That Granada Gypsy woman must have known a thing or two.

It was on one of these child and parcel laden climbs that I deepened my acquaintance with Joe. He too was on his way upstairs and offered his help and also the advice that we should sell our unit and buy a house. This was not quite a disinterested suggestion as he was then a real estate agent. I had first encountered him in a queue eight years before, when I waited to help my brother register at the Welfare Society, together, it seemed, with every one of the newly arrived Jewish refugees from Hungary We got to talking, or rather, he asked questions and I answered them, as he had neither relatives nor friends here to whom he could turn.

As with all good things, we had to wait to buy our house, so we did not avail ourselves of his services when he offered them, and again our friendship drifted along, just exchanging a few words about his latest job and my children's latest *bon-mots*, whenever we happened to meet, until The Army Cap Boy was published in '83.

Many people, some complete strangers, rang me at that time with great enthusiasm, to tell me how much satisfaction they had derived from reading my story and to relate theirs, many of them parallel with, or touching mine. So did Joe, although he confined himself then to congratulations and just a tiny hint that his experiences during the Holocaust were equally worth writing up. Much to my surprise a week or so after that he telephoned me again, late in the evening.

"I've got to see you," he said with suppressed excitement. "Can you meet me, soon?"

It was really awkward. I was always busy, and at this time particularly so, having arrived back from an extended overseas trip in time for the publication.

"Where?" I asked, trying to keep my negative reaction a secret.

He suggested Hakoah, our convenient and much frequented Club, but, I managed to get him to invite me to his place rather. It was within easy walking distance. I was still tired and reluctant to drive. I agreed to go straight away.

His room was on the first floor front of a large, decaying boarding house, one of the surviving few in Bondi. I had given up cigarettes – at last completely – a few months previously so the odour of stale smoke, added to the dimness of the corridor light and the trip-you threads of the frayed carpet, evoked my past sojourn in such places the sharper.

"Yes, yes, I've been waiting for you, come in," he invited, opening his door to my knock. His pleasantly modulated voice retained his dialect. The years had made him slightly rotund but wrought no other changes. He was middle aged and of middle height. He told me again how he hadn't been able to put The Army Cap Boy down, commented on my beard, newly grown, and I on his luxuriant hair (I was losing mine) and moustache, and, the niceties being thus dispensed with he felt free to begin.

"You'll never guess what happened. I won a lot of money on the lottery. First prize. I'm not sure yet how much, but it's a whole lot."

For a moment I didn't know what he meant because I indulged just once a year, but then a splurge, on the anniversary of my liberation, except for raffle tickets.

"Well, I did it this time. I've won a lot of money. I won't know exactly how much till tomorrow."

"You better sit down," I suggested.

"All right, I'll sit down and you sit down too". He took a couple of books off the overstuffed armchair to make room.

"Where are the champagne drinking neighbours?" I asked. "At least a *l'chaim.*"

"Yes, yes. a *l'chaim.!*" He went to the bedside table and fished out a bottle half full of whisky. The glasses were on the mantelshelf. We drank.

"No neighbours, I don't want publicity. I'm only telling you, and that only because I've got to tell somebody or I'll burst. Please keep it to yourself."

"A million?"

"Yes, it could be as much as that. Now!"

In his obviously shabby circumstances perhaps it was silly, but, "You lucky man," I said, while I thought about the significance of that weighty 'Now'. He probably could have made a completely different life, had it come earlier.

Perhaps he saw his room and circumstances with my eyes, for he said, as if to contradict what he surmised me thinking, "I was always very lucky when it really mattered. I wouldn't be alive otherwise."

He was obviously very keen to, had invited me there for the purpose, so I asked him to tell me about it. After a short silence, perhaps to collect his thoughts, perhaps for effect, he started.

"It's hard to know where to begin." I settled myself into a more comfortable position in the chair.

"It was very lucky for me that I overheard two members of the escort to my forced labour brigade discuss their orders for the day, which was to take us, the surviving third of the original 1500, to Germany via Szolnok. You were too young for forced labour, but you know about it. The life of a soldier there, on the eastern front, was precarious then, to say the least.

"For us, the forced labourers, there was, besides the Russian bullets, the cold and disease, additional danger and misery, for we were at the mercy of the sadists among the soldier escort. In spite of this, naturally, we kept hoping to live through it as long as breath remained. But Germany was known to be certain death. So I watched my chance and relied on luck – there was nothing else to do. I took a literal leap in the dark, off the moving truck taking us, when I thought we were passing nearest my home. I hoped my family would be able to hide me till the Russians came.

"I'd had no communication from home for four months, but neither had any of my brigade, so I didn't think anything much of it and put it down to chaos at the post office due to the Russian advances or an added twist of cruelty to withhold mail from the Jews. Some were capable of any nastiness that occurred to them, especially since the war went against them.

"I jumped and landed on a bank and rolled down. I wasn't much hurt. I trudged all night among fields and reached our house just as the sky started to pale. There was nobody there. The place was sealed up. I went around to my uncle's house and my grandfather's. The same story. Then I remembered the rumour we had refused to believe and realised it must have been true. They had all been taken. All the Jews!

"I wandered around like an automaton with this blob of despair inside me uncaring whether I took the next step or not and at the same time driven by the instinct of self preservation. You know how it is, so strong in the young – I was 19. I realised that I had to get away, for the gentile neighbours knew me and could have dobbed me in. The big question was how and where to? The train meant certain capture and I had no money for the fare anyway. As it got light I noticed a bike leaning against a house. I hopped on and started pedalling so fast that the bare trees dotting the roadside passed me like a picket fence."

I could picture the Hungarian winter countryside, the poplar lined road raised above the wintry fields, quite clearly.

"It was just getting dark, must've been around four, when I arrived at the outskirts of Budapest. It was busy, noisy and dangerous, particularly as I didn't know my way about. A tram stopped beside me and I thought of leaving the bike and getting on but I remembered that I had no money, so I just followed it. It led me to the Eastern Station."

I knew the place well, the station of my arrival and departure when I returned to Hungary from Paris, and where I had picked up the prostitute – for bananas!

"I didn't know what to do, where to go. I got off the bike but kept on the move, just pushing the bike, just wheeling it, and ducked into a gateway when I saw people being stopped for identification. They were searching for army deserters as well as for Jews. I saw a large group marched along, old people, women and children with yellow stars on their chests, marshalled by youths with Arrow Cross armbands.

"Then, a pretty girl, she was maybe twenty, spoke to me. She said, 'Would you like to come up with me, I have a lovely warm room and will charge you half price, as you're my first tonight?'

"I didn't know what she meant, all I focused on were the warm room and half rate. In my worn-out condition, that was all I heard. The usual places of accommodation were closed to me. I knew you had to register and show papers. I agreed right away, but as we started walking, me pushing the bike, I realised that I couldn't deceive her and told her that I had no money. She didn't turn away, as I feared she would. She pointed to the bike. 'You could sell that,' she suggested. So I told her I was just up from the country and didn't know my way about. It was then, when she started to give me directions to Teleki Square, you know, the secondhand market, that I blurted out the lot. I had gone through so much that day, the jump from the truck, and no family, then the ride and arriving in Budapest without knowing a soul to turn to. Hungry. I had eaten nothing. No money. A Jew, alone. Those people being marched, at least they were together. It had even crossed my mind to join them.

"I'll never forget the look she gave me, appraising, calculating? Cynics say some gentiles saved Jews then, at the last minute, with an eye to their own future, because they knew the war was lost. I know for sure that she had no such thought. Her reason? Perhaps ordinary, common decency, such as you meet everywhere. I've often wondered since, but never fully understood. At odd times I've wondered how she saw me, what she saw when she looked at me. I was considered good looking. I was healthy, but probably dirty and sweaty from the long ride. Maybe she saw that I was a country innocent, you know, a virgin. In any case, she promised to hide me until I could find a better solution, not in her professional, 'warm room' though, but at her home, a hovel, a downstairs single room with a gas-ring and sink, no bathroom or toilet, in Rozsa Street. As we went inside we introduced ourselves. Her name was Mari.

"We had to sneak in unobserved. I could have neither light nor fire in her absence and had to keep warm by staying in her bed. It was the only one there. By the second day it seemed like two months and by the third, unbelievably, I was snapping at her and complaining. She tried to calm me, in whispers, as we had to be careful all the time not to be heard, and to comfort me as much as she could.

"She brought food and once, wine, whatever she could get, I supposed, for the money from the sale of the bike. 'Come, we'll celebrate that we're still alive,' she said.

"I was in no mood to celebrate, not even to live any more. I began to think the war would never end and I'd have to live like that, locked up, worse than a leper, not even daring to peep outside, till I died. She then reminded me that she was also risking her life, such as it was, 'For a Jew with a honed cock,' and sharing her food and bed, so it was up to me, too, to make the best of it.

"I can see her now as she would stand by the table. Her two perfect globes of breasts were nearly out of her 'working' dress as she bent over arranging the food. Her nipples bulged against the material.

"I told her that, of course, I was grateful. If somebody should have seen me or found out somehow that I was cowering in that lousy room, you know very well that it would have been the end of us several times over, both of us together and separately. They would have found it hard to choose for which of our crimes to hang us: me for being a Jew, a runaway from my brigade, cohabiting with an Aryan, living there without having registered or something else, like suspecting me of being a spy, that they could think up; and her for hiding me. Apart from the discomfort of the room and the feeling of being locked in, I felt so exposed and defenceless. If only I had had a weapon, even a stick or a shovel, which we used to call our rifles in the brigade, because that was what we had, I would have felt more at ease.

"As it was she had to go on encouraging me and comforting me on top of having to brave the cold and the dangers of her profession every night, to earn our living. She kept telling me to be patient and endure whatever there was to endure in that rotten room and await the end. Whether because that was what she knew best to do, or because she was ‘doin’ what comes natur'ly', naturally, she seduced me in the third week. It would have happened sooner, but I was hesitant. All my life I'd been told to keep away from prostitutes. If I'd caught something from her! It didn't bear thinking about. I had no recourse to a doctor nor medicine. And the inevitable change in our relationship that would come also worried me. So far, yes, I was beholden to her for my life, but that I couldn't help. I didn't feel a right to any more.

"'If you'll not lose your head in impatience,' she used to whisper, 'you'll live to see the rotten, Nazi bastards beaten and we'll stroll out of here free, together, and shit on their law. Come, we'll get into bed and celebrate how good it'll be then, and this time, I'll be on top. You like that don't you? ‘Come, climb in before they shoot, hang or stone us. We'll turn on a good one and the law can go and suck.’

"I couldn't resist the little tart. Of course it didn't solve anything but I did feel better, and she was right. Walking up and down wringing my hands and worrying myself into a frenzy of anxiety didn't help. She would come over to me and caress me. She whispered hoarsely and suggestively into my chest and neck in her unique way, 'Make love to me'.

"She groaned so softly, ‘oh, oh, . . .’ she was very good at that. 'Isn't this better than working yourself into a tizzy, you . . . you male.' She called me a fuck artist.

"'You're the artist,' I told her. She was too.

"Then she reminded me, 'I'll have to go to work soon, you'll want to eat again tomorrow'.

"I begged her to stay, not to move. I wanted her never to leave me. She felt so good, right near me where I could count her heartbeat against mine. It was the first good thing to happen to me in months and I felt it was given to me in compensation somehow. But I was afraid that at the first move it'd be gone forever and all the horrible things would come pouring back."

He fell silent, sunk in his erotic memories. I waited for him to resume, not wishing to break the mood. The old, smoke-stained wallpaper cracked in the rising heat from the radiator. I counted the pattern of parallel cigarette burns in the French polish of the table.

"Another time she told me about her life," Joe resumed, "and how she came to be a prostitute. She lost patience with my complaints of being cooped up.

"'You think that only Jews have problems!' she flung at me. 'Let me tell you I had problems before the Germans ever came in. It's true that I can go out freely except when there's bombing, but whatever problem a person has, it's a big problem in their eyes, even if they know that someone else has a bigger one. It's no comfort. I've never told you, because you've enough troubles all by yourself, but I've had no contact with my parents for two years. They cut me out of the family, they don't want to know me.'

"She told me how she married the 'catch', the local football hero, of the small town where she was born and raised, at eighteen. She loved him with every bit of her young, idealistic heart and thought he loved her too. Now, looking back on my life, and with my present experience, I understand how it probably was with them. He loved her too, she was a beauty, but he had soccer and work and mates at the pub in his life as well, whereas she only had him. Pretty soon she felt neglected and started to deceive him with the best of the many bucks on offer. It was wartime and they got called up one after the other. Eventually her husband found out and, if not for the number of lovers she had had, there would have been murder. As it was he didn't know where to start so he didn't kill anybody, just obeyed his call-up, which arrived that day, as luck would have it.

"I used to lie there listening to her tale with half an ear, the other cocked, like any fugitive's for noises outside. She was in the middle of telling me how she came up to the capital to get away from all of them because of the nasty cracks behind her back. You also come from a small town so you probably know how they go on. She was telling me all about it when suddenly we heard heavy footsteps coming down the stairs and a banging on the door.

"I was under the bed with my coat, luckily I had the rest of my clothes on, before I drew my next breath. My heart was racing in my throat and beating louder than the repeated knocking. I thought they'd hear.

"Mari opened up and I saw a pair of man's boots approach. I heard a man's voice demand, 'Where is he? Give him up at once!'

"'Who do you think is here? What makes you think there is anybody here?' Mari asked with just the right amount of indignation.

"'The neighbours heard you talking to the dirty coward of a renegade,' the man explained as he searched the wardrobe and bed – the obvious, and only, hiding places. Another minute and he'd have looked under it.

"I flattened myself into the corner, behind Mari's suitcase and the chamberpot. I clamped my chattering teeth shut but couldn't stop the shivers.

"'There is no renegade here,' Mari told him with the presence of mind of a seasoned diplomat, 'I was rehearsing for a New Year's Eve Gala where I'm to appear out of a huge champagne bottle. Like this!' And she let her gown drop.

"The effect must have been stunning but insufficient, for nevertheless, the man reached for the suitcase handle with one hand, to pull it out and look behind, while he ran the other up Mari's bare leg. She sashayed away.

"'In my line of work I get a lot of old fuddy-duddies, who try their best, mostly from memory,' she cooed. I haven't seen a young piece, with real muscles like you, in ever so long. Seeing as how it's after hours you wouldn't have to pay.'

"I kept thinking, she has to say this, or something, to try and divert him. I reminded myself how lucky it was that he hadn't come an hour earlier, while we had been at it.

"The horny bastard shed his officialdom together with his clothes and was on top of her in seconds. I had to listen to his groans and pantings over my head until he finished, got dressed and left with a wave of his hand.

"'What a crude peasant,' Mari commented as I crawled out drenched in a cold sweat. I felt like a squeezed rag, as if a steamroller had been over me.

"'You could show him, couldn't you, my hero?' she said and embraced me tightly.

"Strangely enough, almost immediately, I was ready and made love to her – for the last time.

"I had come to care for her, to really love her. Once, when she didn't come home for two days I was so worried about her that my brain stopped functioning. For hours on end the same three words revolved around endlessly. I didn't worry about what would happen to me if she had been hurt or killed, but only about her, and that I was powerless to go looking for her or help her, should she need it.

"The bombs and shells were falling all the time by then. We knew it wouldn't be long before the Russians came. I didn't let her go out any more after that, once she got home. Now, looking back, I think she was the only woman I truly loved in my whole life. But at the time, it must have been some kind of a reaction."

He was silent, musing on what he'd said. It must have been the first time since the event, I realised, that he confronted his feelings. I had come out with some amazing words myself when I was interviewed, which I hadn't known I had inside me. The interviewer, already experienced in her job, assured me, when I remarked to her on it, that it was a common occurrence.

Joe resumed his story without further comment. "I knew she had been forced into prostitution when she came up to the capital, when she could get only a housemaid's job for a pittance, and had had to put up with demeaning treatment, that she wasn't used to, and still depend on her dates for extras. She couldn't claim virginity so they finished up in bed every time anyway, so it was a logical step to ditch the job and date professionally. But it was one thing to know about it and another to witness her in action, or rather, hear her 'oh, oh...,' and imagine the rest, even though she was doing it to save our lives. My life. Just as she had been, every time she shared her little bit of food, endured my dangerous presence, or took out the chamber pot after me! But I couldn't bring myself to touch her after that."

"So what happened?" I asked, when he stopped talking.

"We parted after the liberation. I knew what I owed her but I had nothing. And, in any case, how can such a thing be paid for?"

He didn't expect an answer and I didn't try to give him one.

"Did you never see her again?" I asked.

"No, but I heard. I looked for her once and was told that she went back to the country, probably to her husband."

"And you?" I asked him.

"As soon as the roads were open I returned home and eventually a cousin appeared, back from deportation. The two of us are the only survivors of my family. I was very lonely and got married in '48, but it wasn't any good. We had no children and since my wife didn't want to leave I grabbed the chance for a fresh start with the uprising in '56 and finished up here."

"You were never short of partners that I can remember," I hinted.

"No, I wasn't. The most likely was the curly haired divorcee I met on the ship. Her name was Rose, she was bright, with a sweet smile and lovely skin. It looked as if we'd have a good chance, but after a few months she said goodbye. She thought I gambled too much. I had another girlfriend, Janet, who lasted two years. We got on fine, but there was no love there, not even at the beginning. I had other relationships but none of them took off.

"Ever since I first came I have been willing to do anything, wasn't afraid of work, but somehow, no matter what, whenever I collected a bit of money it went before I could do anything with it. I drove a cab and often dreamed of buying my own. I planned to drive the day shift and lease out the night, but the price rose faster than my savings and it remained a dream. I was in real estate and planned to buy a flat. The arguments I've had with landladies! Well, I don't have to tell you how they dictate what you are and aren't allowed to do in your own room! And I thought how good it would be to have my own kitchen and not always eat restaurant food. But the way I worked, casual, and I travelled around, I was a poor risk for a loan. I suppose Rose was right, I have been a gambler."

"So now you'll buy yourself a nice house right away, with a luxury kitchen where you can create your gourmet meals?"

He looked straight at me, with a new spirit, and said, "You'd think so, but now, after all I've been through, that doesn't seem so important. I haven't stopped thinking about the money since I saw that I won. And I decided. I'll go and look for Mari. What do you think of that?"

I thought plenty but he gave me no chance to answer. It was as if he had a need to tell me. I have wondered much since, why me. I vaguely suspect that it had to do with my bluntly expressed feelings of bitterness with the Hungarians of how they could hardly wait for the Jews to be taken so they could loot the few poor belongings left behind. The richer houses had been carefully sealed against random theft by the authorities. None in my district hid or helped any of us.

"I want to find her," Joe said with more decision than I'd so far heard from him. "If I do, we may yet 'turn on a good one', or two, in the remaining years. At least, I want to try!"

He said it with enough determination for me to understand that he would do it, even if I were to try and dissuade him. I had no such intention. I knew that Hungary had relaxed a lot of the anti-capitalist laws by the early eighties to try and improve the economy and to attract foreign capital. They didn't object to the many expatriates returning 'home' to live, as long as they brought their (foreign) money with them. Even those with only pensions from abroad could enjoy many luxuries there by the time they exchanged each dollar for, at this time, thirty *forints.* I did also hear that because of the jealousy and resentment over there and the recession over here conditions have changed, but at that time his plan was feasible.

"You'll have to cash in all your remaining luck to find her after all these years," I told him, "and I certainly wish you plenty of it, but it seems to me you can't go wrong trying. I love travelling and I know, even if you fail to find her, you'll have had a lovely trip out of the attempt and come home with new ideas and possibilities."

As usual, we parted with promises that we would keep in touch, but I heard nothing from, or about him, and assumed that he went as per his plan.

Six years later I was again – and for the last time – in Budapest. They were historic days, when the tide turned against Communism completely in that western bastion of the Eastern Block. We kept ourselves in instant readiness for a sudden dash to the border in the little Fiat we had hired in Rome, in case the avenging sword of civil war, hanging by the fine thread of sincere appeals for forgiveness, should descend and wreak its havoc. For once, sanity prevailed and no extra horror was added to Hungary's long history of blunders and its already numerous, enormous, problems. While we could, we enjoyed the amenities, made our 'sentimental journeys', visited the sights, sailed the Danube and walked up and down elegant Váci Street Mall along with the motley throng, pointing out and translating to our daughter what we thought would interest her. The well stocked foreign language bookshop with its low prices did. She went in taking Adi with her, and I knew I would not see either of them emerge for at least two hours.

I went for another round of the Mall and there, at a tiny footpath table of the most elegant cafe sat Joe with three women, deep in conversation. We must have passed by them moments before, without having noticed them. They were all well turned out, as well as any in that stylish crowd, he particularly so. His moustache was neatly trimmed, no longer tobacco stained, though he was smoking even then, his fingernails were manicured and his shoes were shined.

"*Servus*," he greeted me in the fifties manner, and with less exuberance in his voice than I expected. Then, in English, quickly, out of the side of his mouth, he said, "Don't mention my win!"

A hint is as good as a slap in the face to me, "Of course not," I assured him. I could sympathise with his wish to appear to have made, rather than won, his money, while I appreciated the irony, in the reformed gambler he seemed to have become.

Then he could relax and be himself and ask, reverting to Hungarian, "What wind brings you here? I thought you said you'd never come back."

"Oh, I just brought my wife and daughter to show them my village and a few places."

"Well! This is my wife, Mari," he said, beaming, stressing the name, "and these are my daughters, Julia, and Agnes."

"So, you found her!"

"Yes I found her. It was easy with the registration system they still have here. People don't move around so much."

I pretended that the tears of elated emotion in my eyes were caused by his cigarette smoke. As soon as I could control my voice I turned to Mari, "Did you get the shock of your life when he knocked on your door?" She must have understood that I knew their background, she didn't hesitate to answer.

"No, not at all. I knew him at once, at his first word. It was as though I had been expecting him all the time. Since that no-good husband of mine left in fifty-six, anyway."

"So you got back together with him after the war?"

"Yes, he was a changed man, or so I thought, and so he said. He had been a soldier and had an awful time. But he took off, the first chance he got, and didn't even say 'I'm going'. I suppose he was afraid I'd betray him to the authorities. Those were strange times, but you know, don't you?"

I was sure Mari's daughters had grown up hearing those words over and over again. Both were pretty, all three were heavily made up, plump, snub-nosed and brown haired, Mari with a frizzy platinum blonde fringe and lots of gold glinting here and there: four different chains on her neck only, one on top of the other as was the fashion. An ordinary looking, formerly pretty, but now typically plump countrywoman with pretensions to being a grande dame of the capital, whom nobody would have suspected of having such fine feelings and imagination, let alone heroism.

"I don't suppose you'll leave all this to return to Australia?" I asked Joe.

"On the contrary, we're back and forth all the time. Because Mari has family here, grandchildren, so we spend half the year here and half back home. You know I bought a house. Once you've tasted Australia it's very hard to live elsewhere. For once, money is not the problem, in fact, like this it all comes out of taxes. If I would convert to forints I'd be a multimillionaire!"

Adi believes that everything happens for at least one reason. When Joe first told me his story I thought it was in reaction to the publication of mine. So many people rang me or wrote to me then! His win just gave him an immediate excuse.

Writing my story and re-reading it for publication and then recalling all the memories again so sharply for the publicity interviews, had stirred up in me anew the bitterness of the war years and wasn't the catharsis it was meant to have been. I had thought to have dealt with it. There was no peace, only turmoil within me. Every word of Joe's about Mari had been a balm.

Our sages wrote that whoever saves a life is as though he had saved the whole world. Mari, the former prostitute, was the second Righteous Gentile I had the privilege to meet personally. On parting, she offered to shake hands. For the only time in my life I bent over and, in the old fashioned gesture, with ceremony, kissed hers.

10 REUNION.

At round about the time I turned sixty, Australia turned two hundred. To mark the fact that we had spent the last forty years together, some of us 'reffos' organised a reunion and invited our fellow 1948/49 arrivals to join us. Where? Just as the bicentenary was naturally centred on Sydney Harbour, our reunion's focus had to be the 'Mac'. As it worked out, a more suitable function could not have been found to round off the life of that grand old Hall. Plans were already on hand for it to be rebuilt and it now houses a world class Jewish Museum and Museum of the Holocaust.

People came to the reunion from all over Australia. Some needed to be hosted in private homes, either because, being alone, they didn't relish the idea of a hotel room, or because they couldn't afford it on top of the other expenses. Adi and I hosted a charming woman from Melbourne who was suitably impressed by the beauty of Sydney.

The Bicentenary focused on celebration, on having a party, and we thought we would celebrate too. Life hands you plenty of occasions for mourning. The Hall was decorated and the walls covered by photos. No effort was stinted by willing volunteers, including ourselves, who know the value of pictures and the sadness of their lack – I travelled all the way back to my village to secure one of my dead brother, Andor, in vain. We researched, magnified and photocopied from many sources, as diverse and widely scattered as Brisbane, the Mitchell Library and Perth. Every new arrival made a beeline to look at them and add what they had brought, following our emphatic request to do so. Right throughout the proceedings and up to the last minute, singly and in groups, people admired them, cried and laughed at the sight of them.

Bill, who used to divulge all his secrets in his sleep, now a hugely successful businessman and already a grandfather, came up to me as I gazed at photos of us in front of the Montefiore Home as it had been.

"How young we were!" he remarked. That had been my first reaction too. "We were the dole-bludgers then weren't we?"

"We were poor," I said in mitigation.

"Ah, you don't know poor. Poor is like we were back in my village when my brother and I had to share one pair of shoes."

Steve, grown downright fat, but not the capitalist he planned to be, came up in time to hear.

"That's nothing," he said, "in Paris Theo and I shared a single bed and one pair of trousers between us. Luckily, he worked days and I nights, but once he didn't come home and I had to wait cooped up in the hotel room until he turned up, two days later. He'd picked up a date and forgot all about me."

"Remember when he showed us his winnings one Saturday night?" I asked. He shook his head. "You must remember," I insisted, "we stood in Fitzroy Gardens where the El Alemain Fountain is now and he'd just come back from the races. He had about three hundred pounds in his pocket and we begged him to give it to us. You too, and Adi too, just till Monday morning."

"He could have bought a car. For cash. No hire purchase!"

"That's exactly what you told him then, but he said he was feeling lucky, he'd turn it into three thousand before the night was out."

"And?"

"What do you think? By eleven, when we were coming out of the movies he was his usual, stony, broke self. I had to lend him a couple of pounds."

"One thing though, he always paid you back."

"Not the ten shillings we gave him for cakes when we sent him to Alex's shop in King's Cross Road one Sunday afternoon," Maurice, who walked over to us then, said. He had also done well financially, but was twice divorced and his children didn't want to know him. "We waited and waited," he added, "with the coffee all ready. I never found out what happened to him?"

"He arrived to the shop just as Alex had finished mopping the floor and asked him to wait five minutes and not traipse dirt over the wet tiles, so he nicked up to the baccarat school over the Hasty Tasty. He thought he'd make a packet while the floor dried. 'That bloody Alex,' he told me when I accosted him a day or so later, 'why couldn't he clean his shop five minutes sooner? I wouldn't have lost the cake money.'"

"Alex's cake shop is gone," Bill said.

"Yeah, and so is the baccarat school, and the Hasty Tasty. The Kingsgate Hotel management should reinstate, at least, the frying hamburger smells."

"But the dole-bludgers remain", Andrew who also came up, commented. "They laze around on the sands of Airlie Beach and Byron Bay making babies for me and the rest of the tax-payers to support while I can't get a storeman to stay longer than it takes him to save up the fare. There ought to be a law against it!" He was still handsome, had kept his figure but lost his locks, like me. We all congratulated him and wished him *mazaltov* (luck) on his younger daughter's recent engagement (for which my son, the jeweller, designed and made the ring).

I asked, "Do I really need to remind you of certain lazings on Bondi Beach? And as to the babies, which of us knows how many of ours are out there, brought up by others?"

He started to protest indignantly, but Maurice cut him short. "My funniest memory is of Tibor and Mr. Wilson's cough in Orwell Street." He told us all how Tibor used to rely on his neighbour's cough to wake him. Tibor was a family man already, with a wife and daughter, whom he didn't want to wake at six in the morning with a ringing alarm clock in the one room where they all lived.

Mr Wilson used to come home from his nightwatchman's job just at the right time. Except one night, when Tibor heard the cough, slipped out of bed and got dressed, in the dark, as usual. Not until he read the Clock Milk Bar's large clock face in Darlinghurst Road, did he realise that it was only half past one in the middle of the night. Mr. Wilson was sick, stayed home from work and coughed out of time. Then we laughed. Now, husbands and fathers ourselves, we appreciated Tibor's thoughtfulness and concern for his family's comfort all the more, and laughed again.

There was a large photo of Uncle John and Auntie Peggy, so dear to so many of us. They were both dead by this time. Uncle John had been a prominent and long term supporter of the Youth Aid organisation many of us, his protegés, also worked for, in our turn. Every time Uncle John had come across a donation that was less than he thought it should have been, he was fond of repeating the story of the man who was wicked all his life except for the one charitable donation of ten pounds. This caused problems when the man came to be judged in the heavenly court. Because of his evil life they couldn't let him into heaven but because of his charity, although only once, he didn't belong in the other place either. They didn't know what to do with him until, finally, the littlest angel piped up: "Give him back his ten pounds and let him go to hell".

Adi helped mostly with the twice yearly fundraising stalls held at the Bondi Junction Council charity kiosk, the last time just a few weeks before the reunion. On one occasion she had been left alone, until my arrival, to do the last of the packing up and had lost the total takings. She discovered the loss just as the two of us finished stashing the cartons of leftover goods into the car, ready to pass them on to another organization for their stall.

I opened my mouth, started to say, 'How on earth could you . . ,' and promptly shut it as nothing to the purpose was about to come out. This usually didn't block my adverse comments but this time my eyes were opened, as it were, biblically, and I saw.

Adi is not given to easy tears. I saw her blink them away, lower her hands from her face and clench them into fists of resolve. Thoughts of heroic ancestors, she told me later, impelled her to take deep breaths instead of to hysterics and begin the desperate search for the roll of money.

We unpacked and looked through the cartons of leftovers, dropping tired as we were already, then through the kiosk and over and over the same places again, round and round, wishing to put back the clock to just before that bankroll leaped out, fell out, or was taken out, of Adi's apron pocket.

There was nothing to do but repack. We drove home, conscious of every aching joint, weary, with limbs and spirits dragging, dejected, instead of the usual jubilant, at a hard day's good result.

"I know how you feel, but please, try to go to sleep", I begged her at last, after an hour of tossing and turning in bed, "we'll make it good. We'll replace the money."

Then, during the night, she sat bolt upright out of her sleep, shook me, 'though I was awake, got up and started to throw her clothes on.

"I know where the money is," she said. "Quickly, start up the car!" I nodded, still dazed, but on my way. "I'll get the torch and the kiosk key."

In the car, as we were driving up to Bondi Junction, she told me Uncle John had appeared to her in her dream and pointed accusingly to the huge plastic bag we had left tied up for the Council collection. She couldn't wait to get there in case the rubbish truck beat us to it and kept urging me to drive faster and run the red lights.

"It's the middle of the night, for heaven's sake, nobody's coming."

She jumped out and had the bag open and upended by the time I turned off the engine and pulled on the brake. Then I had to start up again and turn the car so as to shine the headlights where they'd do some good, and sure enough, there was the money, in amongst the unsaleable rubbish. As she is always telling me, in a long career of doing, you're bound to do it wrong sometimes.

As I watched the celebrators come in and greet each other warmly I couldn't help noticing what a large proportion of them were also doers. They were volunteers, active in communal life: this one in Antidefamation; that one a Synagogue President; yet another working for the aged; every woman in some organization to benefit disadvantaged women and children, be it ESRA or W.I.Z.O. or N.C.J.W.; over there a leader in education; it was endless. Many besides worked for one of the non-Jewish charites. We are always saying that we have to do double duty, for the general community as well as for ours.

Mention was made of this in the speeches, so central to the role of the Welfare Society and in honour of The Honourable Sydney Einfeld, A. O., who stood for it in our minds, and who became joint Guest of Honour, together with Australia, for having brought us here and nurtured us, until we were able to stand on our own feet and eventually to become the nurturers ourselves. Each one got a full throated cheer, as we toasted and celebrated them, but really celebrated life itself, the life to which we survived, the life we lived with gusto, to prove that we beat the hate mongers who wanted us dead.

"This was easy," one of the speakers, answering on the Society's behalf, said, "in Australia."

Of course, we all knew, that in fact, it had been hard. There had been opposition to Jewish immigration that had to be overcome. We had been many, arriving in shipload after shipload, in an overture to what was re-enacted over and over again throughout the years: by the 'fiftysixer' Hungarians, by the 'boat people' from South East Asia, and the endless stream of broken, victimised refugees like them, from every trouble spot in the world. Arrivals from the former Soviet Union were the latest and most closely concerning our small community, to whom Australia became a haven.

What the speaker meant was that the government encouraged and helped by making it possible for the Society to function by allowing every dollar donated to the various charities as a tax deduction as well as adding, dollar for dollar, a contribution from the government. I remind myself of this sometimes to calm my fury at the way our public money is spent, contrary to all reason and good sense.

Australia has adopted as official policy the oft repeated commandment to help the stranger. Many present day Aussies can sympathise with the biblical reminder that 'we were strangers (ourselves) in a strange land'. The entrenched prejudices we found on our arrival have largely been shed over the years. Now women, no longer relegated to the kitchen, are coming into their own. Aborigine voices are listened to with more respect. Refugees find safety here from countries of strife in all continents without coercion to abandon their original cultures and be assimilated, in true multiculturalism.

Most new arrivals soon adopt the benevolent attitude of: 'leave the wars that made you come here, back there!' It is now alright to speak a foreign language in public in ordinary tones, wear any kind of clothes – or on some beaches none! Where is the Midriff Measuring Inspector with his tape measure? It is all right to be different, as long as your difference doesn't hurt anybody. This allows minorities, whether ethnic, gay or just plain eccentric, to voice their anxieties and arrange demonstrations where this will be most effective with very little local violence. This is in spite of the exceptionally hate and atrocity filled wars going on in many places 'back home', from where we have immigrants here from both camps. Australia eased us out of our rigid, disciplinarian, conservative, national-chauvinistic attitudes until, unbelievably, we too brought up our children like I saw Jessy and her family do in that long ago Christmas barbecue, with tolerance and 'give him a go'. We in our turn shook Australia, or anyway, most of it, out of its narrow-minded, colonial, culture-cringing bigotry into cosmopolitanism and self confidence.

The speeches were made during dinner, so ample time was left for the best way of celebrating: dancing. Later, we further renewed old friendships after the band packed up, at one, instead of the pre-arranged midnight.

Adi showed her picture of the Port-Said bum-boatman who had laid out his hundreds of shoes for sale next to the gangway and offered marriage to every likely female, including Adi, then fifteen.

"When I found out he already had three wives I was not quite so flattered any more, but it augured well for the future and I thought the experience I gained would also come handy, but my next proposal was made to my mother, *comme il faut*, by a handsome young Turk from Cyprus, and she never even told me about it until much later." Shipboard!

"I wish I had a photo of those five hundred bags of onions," I said, "which we had taken on board in Port Said and took to Colombo, although no picture can convey their monumental odour. For years I couldn't pass the markets without being vividly reminded."

"I don't care, the smoke from our coal-burning engine was worse," Larry informed us, 'our' being the Derna.

"I'm really sorry for you," Margarete said. "I have nothing but happy memories from the Sorrento. The Italians played their lovely folk melodies and Neapolitan love songs on their piano-accordions day and night. I'm still in love with them all."

Margarete and Peter had sustained some drastic financial losses, including their lovely home, thanks to 'the recession we had to have', but, perhaps in compensation, were grandparents several times over (to Jewish grandchildren, a phenomenon becoming rarer and rarer).

"I don't envy my children the task they have, not in business and not in bringing up their own children now," he said, when we asked after his eldest grandson, already at school, a good school, where, nevertheless, drugs were available, as they were known to be in most schools.

The snags and rocks we had had to negotiate were as nothing to what faces the new generation.

"We had our way to make," Peter said

As is usually the case, it took an incredible amount of really hard work to establish the business, but besides the standard rewards I had the unique satisfaction of being an exporter of toys to Japan. The opportunities were there for us. When we arrived everything was brought in from overseas and we started many local industries. Now, again, factories are moving overseas and soon Australian made goods will be as scarce as they were in '48. I knew what Peter meant. Adi had had to be ever available on the other end of the 'hotline' ready to drop whatever she was in the middle of at home. She was there to replace whoever failed to turn up for work, or to provide the extra pair of hands to fill an urgent order. Sometimes, for the lack of grandparents to call on, we had to perform a time-juggling, changing-of-the-guard act, where I awaited the children from school while she went in to work. Due to the besetting dangers from sudden sickness and drugs (already then, but not nearly as bad as now) she insisted on 'being there for them' all the time. I tended to cavil then, thinking it overprotective; I wouldn't now. Our parenting task, hard as we found it, was a pushover compared to this generation's.

I had already reduced my staff in '77 and by the time of the reunion, again, only Adi and I were left working for our firm, as we had been at our beginning. Almost all the souvenirs now sold in Australia are imported from Asia, where they are made, following a government economic and foreign policy that has impoverished many businesses.

Even though I don't always agree wholeheartedly with our policies, I none the less feel compelled to support them because his honour, Patrick Darcy Hills, then Lord Mayor of Sydney, had dubbed me an Australian citizen. Not an impersonal tap with a sword but with a warm handshake. I had come full circle, I once again had a country to belong to and flashed my Australian passport with pride and smug satisfaction at every border crossing on my travels.

To Israel we also give moral and financial aid unhesitatingly, because, as they have been saying over there for years of ongoing crises, 'we have no choice'. This is not only for the sake of the Israelis already living there but also as an insurance policy for all of us still living in the countries of our dispersal. In any country a conflagration may start with a suddenness necessitating a rescue mission of the Operation Moses kind, which plucked the Jews of Ethiopia from imminent annihilation in a spectacular airlift. With the need for much practice, Israel is getting quite good at it.

The Holocaust, just like Israel and our religion, always comes into our every conversation. This is not surprising – as it was written in the psalm, 'our right hand will forget its cunning before we forget Jerusalem'.

Inevitably, the Holocaust looms large in our memories in spite of efforts to suppress it. When it haunts me, as it often does, I play what I had come to call my projector game. I superimpose other memories, like the one of my son, running to my arms when he caught sight of me the day it fell to me to pick him up from kindergarten, Adi being otherwise occupied giving birth. He had shouted with deep satisfaction, "I rode the big bike today, Daddy", in a clear, triumphant tone. Or the one where he put out his arms without a word, to hold his new sister, when I took him with me a few days later to pick them up from hospital. Or the one of the same sister, three years later, getting ready for a party, standing in front of her open wardrobe, a miniature of her mother, with whom she was reasoning – using her mother's very tones and gestures unconsciously – her blonde curls flying as she shook her darling head, "No Mumma, I want to wear the new one, the one you made me." Or her many joyous shouts of, "Look at me, Daddy!" when she had learned to do something new, her agile little body all legs and arms as she swam, jumped, danced, ran and played. Or another favourite, my son getting his toe to the ball at just the angle to send it in for a deciding goal that won his team the championship.

A collage of our favourite photos is pinned to a large board in our bedroom, where we can look at them as we open our eyes. Graduation pictures: of son as a gemmologist, daughter as a language teacher, are prominently featured. There is also an enlargement of a publicity one taken of Adi and me holding a copy of The Army Cap Boy for the occasion of its publication. They are good memories full of vitality, of life. They confront the nightmares with proof that we are beating the 'sons of Belial', the Evil Ones, who always want destruction and death.

I was impelled to start writing The Army Cap Boy in '78 because a young German tourist, when interviewed on T.V. remarked that the Holocaust has no significance for the postwar generation. Nowadays, we are still hearing pronouncements, that: Zionism is Fascism; that Israel treats the Palestinians like the Germans treated the Jews; that the Holocaust never happened, or if it did, it was nothing like as bad as is claimed and in any case Hitler knew nothing about it and therefore all re-emerged Nazis who now worship him are justified in doing so.

The word is bandied about lately in reference to other events, carelessly, or with intent to banalize and so minimize it. For the record: the Holocaust happened, at Hitler's express orders. This is fact. Incontrovertible fact. And it was as horrific as it is claimed. It was the worst crime in history incomparable to any other because of the underlying monumental evil motivating it, the methods employed to carry it out and the unprecedented numbers involved. Edifices were purpose built for the most efficient method of mass murder. Instead of denying it, revisionists and other experts should contribute their efforts to ensure nothing like it ever happens again.

This is necessary because Nazism lives. We, the victims, continue to suffer the aftermath. The hurt scars over but doesn't go away. Adi and the children have 'done valiantly' against my monsters, which are strengthened anew with every synagogue bombing, cemetery desecration and 'action' (pogrom) no matter where it takes place. The haters, some of them call themselves good Christians, though they're not of Pompom's or Mari's kind, rally to the swastika as of old, and continue to lead their crusade against whomever they consider an inferior race, world wide.

How I long to see the day when Martin Luther King's dream comes true! When not only the Americans, black and white, will face their future united, but the stranger, the other, will no longer be seen as a threat, to be eliminated with whatever comes to hand, be it bomb, lynch rope or gas. My fervent wish is that we may see each other as fellow astronauts in this space craft, earth!

We believed that the time was imminent for this when we came out of our several hells in '45. We thought to have been the last ever victims! After what happened to us, surely, nothing of the kind need happen ever again! Not to anybody. We vowed: never again!

A Gazan woman, the mother of one of those 'heroes' who shout: '*Allah Hu Akhbar*' as they stick a knife into the nearest Israeli back, said she was ready to sacrifice her remaining three sons if that's what it took to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. She didn't know that she was echoing all those self aggrandising leaders always so willing and ready to sacrifice the young.

Sacrifice! but not Mari's and Pompom's kind, is demanded in so many conflagrations around the globe that it almost qualifies for a world war, by all the people who fervently and passionately believe in a glorious death instead of the good life.

We (Jews) believe in life. No matter how diverse we are in our observance, we observe the ancient ban and don't sacrifice our children to *Moloch*. We love them and hope to bring them up, as is recited at the circumcision ceremony: to good deeds and to the wedding canopy, in hopeful expectation of life. Of grandchildren.

By a convoluted feed-back process people seem to get the government they deserve, which reminds me of the schoolboy who, when his father berated him for his poor school marks as a lazy, stupid good for nothing, asked, "Do you put it down to inheritance or environment Dad?"

We are hotly debating the republic issue in Australia now that England, whose monarch we share, has moved closer to Europe and further from us. We have yet to learn who will come out the winner for Australia's 'soul' in the long fought tussle between Britain and America.

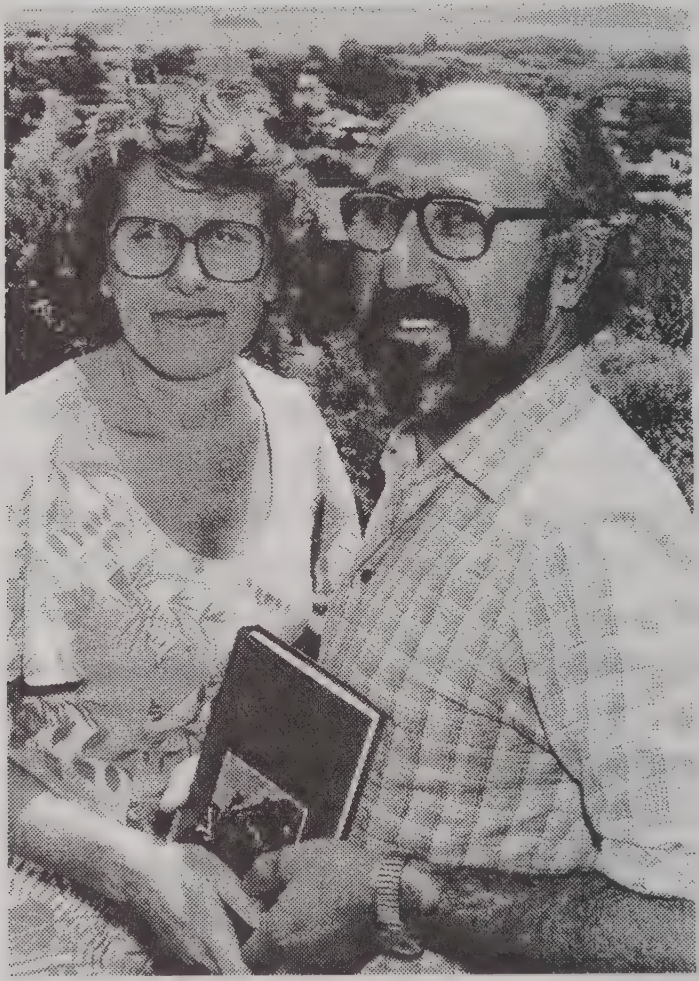
I swore allegiance to Queen Elizabeth, a hard working, sincere woman devoted to the service of all her subjects and not to be compared to tzar, kaiser or king, whom their subjects eliminated in this century, and instead of whom the Italians got Mussolini; the Spaniards Franco; the Russians Stalin and the Germans Hitler.

It has been established that many of today's prison population were child abuse victims. Insofar as parents cherish and care for their children, insofar as a country cherishes its citizens, so far is that child, that citizen, going to have the chance to be a balanced, happy member of society, a complete human being. There is an unforgettable battle scene in the movie, South Pacific, where the United States Navy puts forth its might in an unlimited effort of man and machine power, to rescue one single marine, to the total mystification of the watching and fiercely firing Japanese enemy, to whom kamikaze was the ideal!

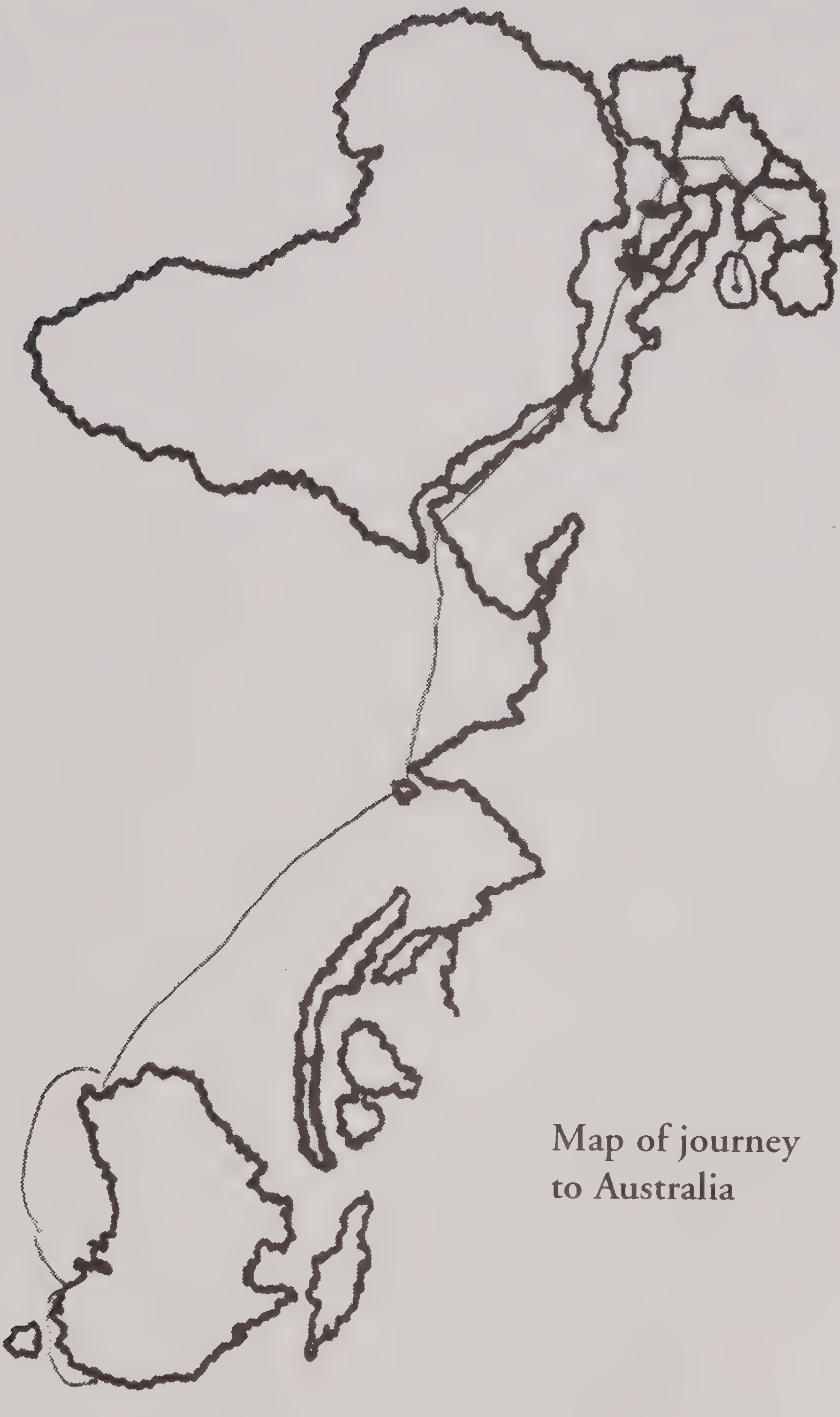
Although I consider myself to be healthy, I concede some of my former shape, quite of lot of my hair, its colour, and some vigour, to the years. Perhaps as compensation, in a tooled leather folder such as the boat merchants sold to the passengers in Port Said with so much noise and gusto, and similar to the one in which my parents had kept our important documents under the roof of our house back in my village, some certificates have come to repose. In order of arrival, they were: marriage certificate (civil); business name registration; factory registration; naturalisation certificate; mortgage certificates; birth certificate (blue); birth certificate (pink); *ketuba* (Jewish marriage contract, we succumbed for the children's sake); school reports; higher school certificates; and diplomas.

I lay claim to gains in bits of knowledge, lots of experience and most of all self confidence, enough to pontificate, anyway to my dearest, who mostly counterpontificates and disagrees. I have learned that, unfortunately, I will never know all that I thought I would, but am confident enough to admit it and experienced enough to accept that life may nevertheless be beautiful. The advice I give travellers, not to allow the inevitable mishaps to mar the whole trip I apply to my staying at home and living my everyday life too.

In spite of the myriad shortcomings of a not yet perfect society, like twenty-five years, on average, for victims to gain compensation; twelve years for corruption to surface, and a further five of a Royal Commission's time to investigate it – often to not much purpose, I feel cherished, along with my fellow citizens, in this country, still the best, and I bless my good fortune, as we all did at the reunion, for having been led here.



The Authors Zoltán & Adi at Home, 1983



Map of journey
to Australia

My grandfather had been a hussar in the Hungarian cavalry. . . My father was a little deaf for he had served in the artillery during the First World War and his proud boast was that his hand had been shaken by the Emperor Franz Joseph.' This didn't prevent him being dragged off to Auschwitz where he and most of his family were murdered, as I would have been, had I not left for the capital when I was thirteen.

Through Budapest, Bergen Belsen, and Paris, fate led me to far Australia in 1948. Here, from a 'reffo' I became a 'New Australian' then a naturalised Australian and lost my stateless status..

English was a trap. One weekend, spent with the Lewinneks, Auntie Peggy asked me to put the kettle on. . . . without the least idea what a kettle might be, . . I caught sight of the cat. . . and carried it out the back door. . . . When no boiling kettle was found I had to explain that I had put the cat out instead of the kettle on the stove because I thought kettle meant cat little.

At the Railway Workshop in Redfern . . . 'As soon as I agreed to work overtime the foreman told me to, "disappear a coupla hours, just get lost, will ya!" As I told the union representative, the place should have a disappearing room, for all the overtimers who needed to disappear. ' The toilet was too small and smelly.

Poignant....very humorous
Sunday Telegraph 6.11.83

hard to put down...full of humour
The Herald 17.11.83

"A powerful and important book, a marvellous read."
Phillip Adams

r.r.p $19.95

9 780957 716322